

# Manager Guidance

## *Supporting Staff During Evacuation, Displacement, and Shelter In Place Orders*

### **About this resource**

Whether it is due to conflict or a natural disaster, being evacuated or instructed to shelter in place is unavoidably stressful. During these sorts of experiences, managers play a vital role in shaping how their staff experience these events and, consequently, how well they cope.

### **Who is this resource for?**

Managers of staff facing (or currently experiencing) evacuation, internal displacement, or shelter in place orders.

### **What's in this resource?**

This resource offers advice to managers about how they can support staff and promote wellbeing before, during, and after events that culminate in evacuation, displacement, or shelter in place orders.

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## Supporting Staff Before Evacuation, Displacement, or Shelter In Place Orders

In many cases, however, the decision to evacuate some staff and/or instruct staff to shelter in place will occur after a period of escalating tension, threats, or increased risks.

After a crisis, people's emotional experience is often the reality that they will remember most clearly. If staff feel very stressed but also feel that their managers and the organization genuinely care about them, that will make the stress easier to bear and the experience less traumatic over time.

As such, during this time of waiting and watching, managers at all levels can support the wellbeing of staff they supervise by doing some or all of the following:

- **Make supporting the ongoing employment and wellbeing of staff during this time a very high priority.**
- **Reduce normal workload pressure as much as possible.** Recognize that staff will be anxious and distracted, and unlikely to be able to focus on work as well as they normally can.
- **Alleviate uncertainty about future employment as much as possible.** This can involve:
  - Reassuring staff as much as reasonably possible that your organization intends for them to keep/return to their jobs.
  - Keeping staff members working in their roles (or a suitable short-term emergency response role) as much as possible.
- **Remind managers that you supervise that the role of a leader is to guide people during challenging times.** Reaffirm that your organization has selected them for a position of management responsibility, and leadership during these times is a part of that role.
  - Send this tips sheet to any managers you supervise and remind them of their responsibility to support the wellbeing of their staff during these times.
  - A positive way to do this is to remind managers that the strength/capacity of the manager is dependent upon the strength/capacity of the team. If the manager wants to be able to perform well after the crisis has passed, they will need to make sure their team members are looked after and are able to function well.
- **Be aware of and acknowledge that many staff will be experiencing conflicting emotions.** Review the *Self Care During Mandatory Evacuation* tip sheet, which outlines some of the conflicting emotions (e.g., loss and anger) staff may be experiencing.
- **Call a meeting of all staff before the evacuation/event.** If possible, gather all staff together before the event. Acknowledge that crises are testing times for people's spirits and affirm that staff need to join together for strength and support in these times. Following are some things to cover during the meeting.
  - **Clearly communicate to staff that their physical and emotional safety is a top priority.**

- **Acknowledge the loss.** Loss is inherent in an evacuation or shelter in place (SIP) situation (e.g., loss of normalcy, routine, relational connection, programming momentum). Acknowledge this and the likelihood that staff will be feeling a mixture of emotions.
- **Remind staff of the bigger picture.** This evacuation or SIP event is (hopefully) a short-term action in response to specific events. At some point (hopefully) things will return to “normal.” The context will continue to change, and when it is safe to resume normal working operations that is what you intend to do.
- **Cast a vision of a hopeful future.** Cast a vision for people to give themselves to that is bigger than their individual struggles and suffering. For example, talk about any plans for resuming work operations after this event. Convey hope and realistic optimism.
- **Encourage staff to take care of themselves.** Send any staff who may be evacuated the *Self Care During Mandatory Evacuation* tips sheet.
- **Say goodbye.** If an evacuation is imminent or likely, use this as a chance to say goodbye/ “until we meet again.”
- **Remind staff about the staff support resources available to them.** Remind staff about any counseling or other support options available to them and encourage staff to access those resources. Also, consider seeking counselling or coaching support yourself. Whether you are present on site or managing remotely, do not underestimate the strain of feeling responsible for staff (and, often, simultaneously helpless) during events like these.
- **Ensure clear plans for communication are in place.** If a phone/radio tree is in place, test this before the event. Ensure the practice run covers what to do in a scenario where you are unable to reach the person tasked to you in the call tree. Additional communication considerations include:
  - If the event involves a natural disaster, make concrete plans with staff for how you will contact each other to pass along information, and when you will (if able) assemble together after the event (e.g., Wednesday at 8am).
  - For any staff staying behind, emphasize the importance of maintaining regular contact with each other, if possible, and make plans for when/how that will happen (e.g., every Friday at 1pm).
  - If communication will involve a manager sending out SMS text messages, the manager should clarify the anticipated timeframe for people to receive messages (e.g., I will plan to send out a text message update every day at 6PM). This enables people to conserve their mobile phone batteries, and only switch on their phones around 5:30pm.
- **Update staff fully and regularly.** Keep staff regularly updated regarding any security concerns and plans for evacuation or SIP orders. The more staff know about the context and likely organizational decisions/instructions, the more in control and prepared they will feel. Likewise, if staff know when they will next receive an update, the more in control and able to cope they will feel.

## Supporting Staff During Evacuation, Displacement, or Shelter In Place Orders

For additional detailed guidance on supporting staff during evacuation, displacement, or SIP orders, review the following resources:

- **For general advice on communicating and supporting wellbeing following traumatic events or during ongoing crises:** Review *Manager Guidance: 10 Tips for Supporting Staff After Traumatic Events*.
- **For staff who have been displaced or are sheltering in place:** Review *Guidance for Managers of Staff in Isolated and Hazardous Situations*. This resource provides guidance for supporting staff if you are present with staff in isolated and hazardous situations and additional guidance on remotely managing staff who are in isolated and hazardous situations.

### Quick tips

During the hours/days when an evacuation is actually occurring, staff are being internally displaced, and/or SIP orders are ongoing, you can support staff in the following important ways:

- **For staff who are evacuating:** Do everything possible to ensure the necessary logistics have been attended to, that the evacuation proceeds smoothly and safely, and that evacuated staff have comfortable and safe temporary accommodations to go to while next steps are being considered.
- **Update all staff as fully and frequently as you are able, answer questions, and reinforce the core message that staff safety is a top priority.** In a communication vacuum, people tend to assume the worst.
  - More frequent communication is better than not enough
  - Communication delivered in predictable intervals is best, if possible.
  - Facilitate contact with family and other loved ones from whom staff have been separated (e.g., by providing phone credit or access to a phone).
- **When you feel that there is little or nothing you can do to help:** Sometimes you may feel that there is little you can do to help. Feeling helpless can be very distressing and uncomfortable. If you feel helpless you can:
  - **Listen.** It can help your colleagues to share what they are experiencing. During times like these, you can support them by listening well.
  - **Do not make promises in the moment or offers of assistance that is outside your control:** When someone is desperate and you desperately want to help, it is tempting to make offers or promises that you may not be able to keep. Do not do this. Do not promise to resolve the situation or send resources or make any commitments in the moment.
  - **Ask questions about what staff *can* do in the current situation:** After you have listened carefully, you may want to ask questions about what your colleagues *can* do in the current situation. How can they take productive action in their current circumstances?

## Supporting Staff After Evacuation, Displacement, or Shelter In Place Orders

Sometimes natural disasters occur suddenly, and security situations deteriorate quickly and unexpectedly. If the crisis precipitating the evacuation or shelter in place orders occurred quite suddenly, review the tips outlined above under the “BEFORE” section and employ as many of them as possible now.

In addition:

- **Locate and account for all staff.** Connect with all staff who have been evacuated or are sheltering in place as soon as possible to confirm that they are safe.
- **Communicate to management above you the importance of accounting for all staff.** Depending on the local context, there may be pressure to resume normal work operations as soon as possible after the evacuation (particularly in the case of natural disasters). Communicate to management above you the importance of staff care for team morale. If you work for an NGO, it may be possible to commence some emergency response activities while the process of accounting for staff is underway.
- **Recognize that staff who have been internally displaced will likely have acute financial needs.** Debt as a result of emergencies can be a significant issue for staff (and can also be a precursor to extreme emotional distress and even suicidal thinking). In many cultures, staff may be used to relying on the extended family structure for support. (Or, more often, staff have an extensive extended family structure that relies *on them* for support). Being displaced often disrupts these functioning networks and causes sudden financial pressure and extreme stress. The organization can help alleviate this burden by:
  - Giving impacted staff their salary early or providing some sort of reasonable salary advance or loan. Do not wait until they have to ask for it. HR and leadership should proactively work to offer a salary advance to all impacted staff.
  - Looking for ways to link staff to assistance programs that are internal and external to the organization.
  - If the organization is an NGO, include staff as beneficiaries of assistance when they are also part of the impacted population and are eligible to receive supports.
- **Recognize that staff who have been sheltering in place will likely have urgent personal priorities and possibly acute financial needs.** Staff who have been sheltering in place probably also have pressing physical and psychosocial needs. Before you expect them to be able to concentrate on work (including any emergency response programming following a natural disaster), recognize that staff who have been sheltering in place will want/need to ensure that their families are safe and being cared for and that physical needs are being met.
  - Provide time off to staff to address their own acute family needs. Create a roster to rotate this emergency leave among staff if necessary to prevent extreme programming challenges.
- **Provide staff with additional relevant resources:** Provide staff with copies of relevant resources. For example:
  - *Maintaining Wellbeing During Displacement*

- *Self-Care During Mandatory Evacuation*
- *Guidance for Staff in Isolated and Hazardous Situations*
- **Ask staff how they are doing.** Be aware of the various reactions and the confusing mixture of emotions that staff may be experiencing. Be mindful of this during conversations with staff. Questions you may want to ask include:
  - How are you feeling right now?
  - Do you have any feelings today you didn't have yesterday?
  - Now that we have the gift of hindsight, is there anything we did or decided yesterday that you are having second thoughts about? Anything you wish we had done differently?
- **Provide access to psychosocial support consultations, and/or individual or team facilitated debriefs or exercises if possible.** Survivor's guilt, suicidal thoughts, extreme mood swings, and feelings of despair and hopelessness are relatively common by those facing displacement from their homes, and individuals can benefit greatly from having associated thoughts and feelings explored and normalized.
- **Talk with your manager about specific things the organization can do to help the staff whose families have been impacted.** Your organization's benefits program may cover access to counselling for staff members and their families. Consider other ways you can provide practical assistance to colleagues who have been impacted.
- **If you work for an NGO, resist felt "response urgency" and slow down.** Recognize that national and expatriate staff on the ground will usually be carrying an increased stress load relative to expatriate and other support staff who fly in/back in after a situation is deemed safe. Slow things down. There will be a lot of felt pressure from the organization, the international response community, and the crisis dynamics at play in the situation. However, if you want your teams to be functioning well in the medium to long term, take a breath and slow things down on the front end during the immediate crisis response. This will help protect and serve the staff who are most impacted, who are the very staff who will be most integral to programs in the long term.
- **Consider scheduling an operational and/or psychological debrief 30-45 days after the crisis.** Immediately after the crisis may not be the best time to conduct a group debrief of the experience. However, it may be very useful to schedule one or more debriefs several weeks after the crisis. These group debriefs can serve several functions, one of which is checking in on how staff are doing at that time.
- **Seek support yourself:** Managing a team during events like this can be very stressful. Consider seeking counselling or coaching support.