

Human Resources Reminders for Natural Disaster Planning: Before, During, and After

By Mary Ann Saenz-Thompson, SPHR, SHRM-SCP

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This article will cover some of the human resource plans, policies and considerations in preparation for a catastrophic natural event which can affect county operations and its employees. A brief summary of the HR response will be also be examined describing HR efforts after a crisis with the transition of getting back to “normal”.

In future articles, various HR topics will be covered to create awareness and to easily direct you to available resources on current and emerging HR issues.

Defining a Natural Disaster or Crisis

Texas has a diverse landscape within which many different types of natural calamities can occur. This diversity is found in the Big Bend country, the Gulf Coast, the west Texas mountains, the central Texas hill country, the plains of the Panhandle, the Piney Woods of east Texas, the prairies and lakes region, and the south Texas plains. It is possible to have icy day closures in some parts of the state while other regions are enjoying warm weather. Counties may to have to make operational decisions due to a wide variety of catastrophic events such as ice day closures, major floods, blizzards, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and possibly earthquakes.

As described in Wikipedia, a *crisis* “is any event that is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society. ...they occur abruptly with little or no warning...”.

The good news is that a major natural crisis usually has a low probability of happening. The bad news is that when it does occur, the natural crisis is a high-impact event and occurs at an unexpected time. There are Texas regions that have had more than one natural disaster in a short span of time. But, there are other parts of Texas that had not experienced natural disasters for decades, namely the south Texas Gulf Coast which was struck in 2017 by its first major hurricane which also created unprecedented historical flooding in south Texas.

Regardless, HR has a role to play when it comes to all natural disaster planning and dealing with the after effects.



Policies and Practices

One major consideration is to address possible personnel issues such as employee scheduling and employee compensation in a written policy before a natural disaster happens. A commissioners’ court may want to consider adopting a policy, or adding to their existing emergency closing policy, any

differential pay considerations for essential employees that must work while most county operations cease. These essential employees, such as law enforcement, dispatchers, environmental health, animal control, EMS, road and bridge, payroll staff, and emergency management, to name a few, are required to work before and throughout a crisis. While each elected official decides on their respective departmental needs and which employees are essential personnel, the commissioners' court decides if defined essential employees should be compensated differently while working thru a natural disaster. Having these essential specific positions identified in a written and adopted policy will help alleviate future payroll confusion with county employees.

Questions for the commissioners' court to consider for policy development include:

- How to pay non-essential county employees who cannot report to work because of operational closures? Should there be a time limit on pay or should benefits be utilized in whole or in part?
- How to pay defined essential county employees who have to work before, during and after a natural crisis? Are these essential employees specifically designated by position in a written, adopted policy?
- Will exempt employees, those who do not receive overtime due to their job classification, receive overtime or differential pay for hours worked during a disaster?
- What are the time frames for a phasing essential employees to report back to work? For example, are essential personnel classified in tiers 1, 2, or 3 for reporting to work?

If worksites are unavailable or limited, elected officials can decide if flexible work options or remote work opportunities are possible for other employees.

Other policy and practice questions for a county to consider in the event of a disaster or closure are:

- How will payroll be processed, employee benefits continue, and all other HR functions and policy administration be done?
- Are the necessary HR and payroll records scanned in the event they are destroyed or inaccessible?
- Is there a payroll plan in place for processing payroll in the event technology is lost or if banks are inaccessible to employees?

It is important to replicate on paper the necessary items that will be needed in the event technology is lost and inaccessible if a disaster happens. One idea is to create an emergency kit that is readily available and waterproof that includes everything that might be needed immediately to include the county personnel policy manual, vendor contact information, and paper time-sheets. Time worked recordkeeping for any available FEMA reimbursement is crucial according to current FEMA requirements. Paper timesheets can help with this requirement.

Communication

One thing that is easily forgotten when taking the necessary HR steps in preparing for a crisis is communication. Communication with employees before and after a crisis is critical to avoid future confusion or misinterpretations.

Here is a list of considerations:

- Does the county have updated employee contact information including their emergency contacts?
- Has the county relayed the message to employees to have a 72-hour home emergency plan?
- Do employees have online access to the county's personnel policies?
- Has the HR department or designated person communicated with employees on what to expect in terms of compensation, responsibilities, benefits, and given employees information on where updates can be accessed?
- Is there a designated person assigned to communicate with employees during and after a natural disaster; and, has this information be communicated to department heads and employees?
- Does the county have a way to communicate messages to employees who are displaced such as thru a county website, social media, text messaging, etc. for important updates? Has this information been communicated to employees at the time of hire and regularly thru out the year?
- Have employees been trained to use good judgement for social media postings when there is a disaster and what "internal" information or non-confirmed postings should be avoided in order to prevent panic and confusion?

Other Considerations

In recent disasters, it was reported that some county employees did not have a place to live while they were required to come back to work. If this is a possible scenario, is there a plan in place to temporarily house essential employees who must report to work due to departmental needs?

An employee assistance plan with local or virtual providers, if available, or a list of local and state resources for stress and grief counseling can be helpful in assisting employees along with having a list of mental health care benefits information. Another consideration is to plan for a system to conduct well-being checks for affected county employees who suffered losses after a crisis.

A human resource member can be a part of a county team assisting with other county functions before, during, and after of disaster. This includes collaborating with individual departments to help determine which employees will be needed during and after a crisis. The elected officials and supervisors will know who these employees are; HR can work with management beforehand and have this information ready. HR can also be a part of the internal communication efforts in a control center environment to assist with reviewing, executing response initiatives, and communicating necessary information to key internal and external people and employees.

Final Thoughts

It is important to periodically review and evaluate an HR plan to determine if any adjustments or improvements should be made. Getting buy-in from upper management and elected officials in HR planning and execution is essential. A county HR director who went thru several disasters said that it was their county's experience that employees tend to call the human resource department or the person assigned HR duties when they have questions.

Whether or not a county has a stand-alone HR department or not, anyone who manages people wears an HR hat. Hopefully, the information provided above can be helpful in the event it is needed someday.

Click here _____ for a handy reference checklist of questions and answers for HR preparation. *(insert a link to the checklist)*

For further information on these or other topics, please contact your assigned TAC HR consultant. It is recommended that you additionally consult your county attorney or other legal counsel. Recommendations and information provided are based on current information in the field of Human Resources. This information is not intended to be, nor should they be construed as, legal advice or legal guidance