

Nonprofit Disaster Plan – Your Blueprint for Survival

By: Linda Reid, Nonprofit Relationship Banking Officer, Columbia Bank

It's a cliché, but like most, it is rooted in important truth: "if you fail to plan, you plan to fail." This idea is never more important than when it comes to the potential devastating impact a natural or manmade disaster can have on a nonprofit. As we have seen time and time again, nonprofit organizations are a vital link in the chain of recovery during times of community-wide crisis. That fact means it is absolutely critical for your organization to be able to withstand a disaster and continue to deliver services - and that can only happen if you have a plan for disaster and business continuity.

As a bank that works with nonprofits throughout the Northwest, we continuously talk with our clients about the need for such plans. No organization wants to face a crisis with little or no forethought about how to respond and recover.

A disaster plan is a fairly complex document and we do not have the space to be able to go into great detail here, but we did want to address what we believe are five key elements that all good disaster recovery plans should have in common.

Assessment

In your plan, you should have a section on how your organization is going to quickly diagnose the impacts from disaster. This includes a list of key personnel and their roles in assessing your physical facilities, computer systems and impacts to staff. Just like with a doctor treating illness, recovery can only happen after an effective diagnosis.

Communication

Unfortunately, disasters seem to have a way of happening at night or on weekends and this places an incredible strain on a nonprofit when staff is at home or away from work. All recovery plans need to have a thorough section on how key staff will communicate. Do you have a thorough list of all employees' personal email addresses, home phone and cell phone numbers? In the event of a large scale disaster that knocks out communications, do you have a plan to meet up in a predesignated location to begin preparations? Being able to communicate in the face of disruption and during non-business hours is a fundamental pillar of a good disaster recovery plan.

Decision making

Making decisions for an organization is tough enough on a routine Tuesday, but imagine having to make critical decisions during a wildfire evacuation order or when all of your computer systems have crashed? In your disaster recovery plan you need a section on how decisions will be made if your normal chain of

command is disrupted. For example, if the executive director cannot be reached, your plan will have a designated second in command who is authorized to make critical decisions. It's important to note that this team member may not be the person in your normal line of succession. In a crisis, you might want to have a person who is intimately familiar with your operations be the designated decision maker on an interim basis.

Operations

Speaking of operations, a good plan will have a strategy for how you can continue to deliver on your mission despite a crisis. There have been many inspiring stories about nonprofits quickly setting up tables, tents and temporary shelters to help their clients during the wildfires earlier this year in California. In most cases, those organizations had plans in place that addressed how they could continue to operate during unbelievably harsh conditions. Advanced tactics for how you can obtain equipment (whether through advanced purchases or a list of vendors/partners you can call at a moment's notice) to deliver services is going to be a hugely important part of your plan.

Data and records

Finally, your plan needs to address how you can preserve and maintain your client and vendor relationships and information in the event of a disaster. Every nonprofit needs some kind of data back up so that a natural disaster, virus or hack doesn't wipe out your client records. A key part of this plan is having off-site data storage, whether a physical backup device, or cloud-based solutions. Further, your plan should address how frequently a complete back up of your records should occur.

Your nonprofit is important in the lives of your employees and your clients; you owe it to all of them to manage the organization through extreme hardship. Devoting time and thought toward creating and implementing a disaster plan is more than just a good practice, it's a critical component to ensuring your organization's ultimate survival.

About the author



Linda Reid, Relationship Banking Officer in Vancouver, Washington, is responsible for client relationship management and retention and is dedicated to creating new ways to enhance those relationships. Linda specializes in Nonprofit Clients but also has a strong background in Commercial Business Relationships. She is responsible for developing new business relationships and formalizing a strong network of referral sources while sharing the Columbia Bank story in her community. Linda strives to deliver the highest level of customer service and always puts client's needs first.

Linda has nearly 40 years in banking, including 20 years of experience in commercial real estate. Her expertise resides in nonprofit and small business banking. She is actively involved in her local community, serving as a board member with Vancouver's Downtown Association; Leadership Clark County; the Clark County Mural Society; The Nonprofit Network of SW Washington, Ducks Unlimited, The Magenta Theater, and Washington State University Business MAP Growth Program. She is also an active committee member for the Parks Foundation of Clark County and a volunteer with Junior Achievement.