

# Advice for Disability Service Agencies

A major earthquake and widespread damage can occur at any time and on any day of the week. It can occur during business hours, when many staff and clients are present at a disability service agency. Agencies need to plan what they are going to do in this situation – and to realize they face a complex and difficult task. Too many people are under the delusion that after the shaking stops, everyone either goes home or to an emergency shelter. As a result of conversations with emergency preparedness professionals and staff and clients at disability service agencies, the following information should be presented to agency staff, clients, and appropriate caregivers.

## **SITUATION:**

A strong earthquake centered not far away strikes at 10:00 in the morning. Strong shaking goes on for 60 seconds. When the shaking stops, the scene at your agency is as follows:

1. Most everyone is shaken and scared. Several people have minor injuries. One person has a significant injury but it does not appear critical to you.
2. Many windows are broken and glass shards have fallen inside your facility. One wall is severely cracked. The roof has held up but the ceiling of one office sags downward.
3. Desks, chairs, file cabinets and other furniture have shifted position. Many objects have fallen to the floor and some are broken. Ceiling tiles have fallen. There is much dust in the air inside your facility.
4. There is no electricity. Office phones don't work. Cell phone systems are overloaded and unavailable. Laptops with Wi-fi work and, if a pay phone is nearby, it will probably be working.
5. A water pipe in a restroom has sprung a moderate leak.
6. Most of your staff and a number of your clients are at the facility. A group of staff and clients are off-site. A few clients were in transit to your facility at the time of the earthquake. Some of your staff are at home.

## **ACTIONS: In the 12 hours between the 10 am earthquake and 10 pm –**

1. What do you want the Red Cross to do?
2. What do you want City staff to do?
3. What do you want your staff to do?
4. What do you want your clients to do?

**In the 12 hours following a major earthquake:**

**1. Red Cross – Reality Check**

Typical Expectations	Reality
Take care of injured or at least the more seriously injured	WILL NOT OCCUR
Organize transport to hospitals	"
Direct people to safe places	"
Assist those needing shelter	"
Provide emergency supplies	"
Assist with communications	"
Provide auxiliary services	"
Provide support during and after the event	"
Assess needs quickly	"
Support City activities	WILL OCCUR

Do not count on any services in the first 12 hours. Evacuation sites and shelters will open later - perhaps days later - depending on availability of undamaged structures and the arrival of staff and volunteers.

**2. City Government – Reality Check**

Typical Expectations	Reality
Provide medical service, attend to injured	VERY LIMITED SERVICE
Transport injured	VERY LIMITED SERVICE
Help place everyone	WILL NOT OCCUR
Check for gas leaks	ONLY AT MAJOR BLDG.
Check buildings for safety	ONLY AT MAJOR BLDG.
Clean-up buildings	WILL NOT OCCUR
Provide instructions and emergency updates	VERY LIMITED SERVICE
Lead and delegate duties and responsibilities	WILL OCCUR
Have a plan	WILL OCCUR
Be the lead agency	WILL OCCUR

Requests for help from the Fire Department or through 911 will be forwarded to a central dispatcher and a response may take hours. Top priorities will be critical emergencies and locations where many people are present.

Your city's fire stations might initiate visits to surrounding area schools, urgent care facilities, individuals on registered lists, and reported critical incidents.

Your city's few ambulances will be available to transport injured people. Local buses will not transport injured people. A day or two – or three – later, once shelters and evacuation sites are organized, local buses will transport people to these locations.

No shelters will be available. Perhaps one or two evacuation sites will be set up and have snacks, water, restrooms, and basic first aid. Limited medical services will be provided by ambulance crews.

City staff will check for gas leaks, starting with emergency calls and then major buildings. It is unlikely that your agency's building and any homes will be checked in the first 12 hours.

Your city will not be doing any building clean-up.

Information will be available at fire stations and occasionally from police cars, fire vehicles, and perhaps a police helicopter equipped with a public address system.

While your city will be the lead response agency during the first 12 hours, services will be very limited.

### 3. Disability Service Agencies – Reality Check

Typical Expectations	Reality
Remain calm	GOOD IDEA
Think clearly	GOOD IDEA
Calm others	GOOD IDEA
Organize teams and implement EQ response	VERY GOOD IDEA
Stay around office	UNREALISTIC
Protect clients and selves	GOOD IDEA
Assist as needed and support with expertise	GOOD IDEA
Assess injuries provide medical aid as best as possible	GOOD IDEA
Call 911 on behalf of injured people	UNREALISTIC
Evacuate everyone to pre-determined open area	AVOID HAZARDS
Release everyone to home or to school	UNREALISTIC
Assess damage	GOOD IDEA
If building heavily damaged, call Fire Dept	UNREALISTIC
Shut off the water to the building	UNREALISTIC
Clean up	TAKE PHOTOS FIRST
Use cell or land phone to call clients off-site	UNREALISTIC

"Stay Around Office" is unrealistic because staff people have children of their own, elderly relatives, pets, and personal possessions at home or elsewhere that demand and deserve attention. Your agency needs to plan for staff to come and go. Also, some staff will need to get food, water, batteries, blankets, medical supplies, etc. for the staff and clients at the agency.

"Call 911 on behalf on injured people" is unrealistic because 911 will be clogged with calls. Only call for the most critical emergencies. Even then, a response may take hours.

"Evacuate everyone" is vital but the outside location must be safe from falling debris, fallen power lines, etc. and be comfortable for all for many hours.

"Release everyone to home or school" is unrealistic unless the agency is certain that everyone so released is headed to safety – and that will depend on many circumstances.

"If building heavily damaged, call Fire Department" is unrealistic because the Fire Department will be busy with major fires and hazardous materials incidents and with evacuating people from high-rise buildings.

"Shut off the water in the building" is unrealistic. Staff and clients may soon be desperate for water – even if it is undrinkable it will still be usable. Regarding shutting off natural gas, the Fire Department recommends against it.

"Use cell or land phone to call clients off-site" is unrealistic because cell and land phone systems will probably not be working.

Other challenges agency staff will face in the 12 hours after a major quake include:

- Restrooms - you may have to use plastic bags for toilets.
- Off-site clients may expect intervention from your agency.
- Aftershocks - one or more will be strong quakes.
- At local stores there will likely be crowds of people desperate for food, water, batteries, etc.
- People in the area around your agency will come to the agency and seek help.
- Arrange shelter on the first night for everyone who cannot go a safe home.
- Take pictures of damage for insurance and FEMA documentation.

#### 4. Your clients – Reality Check

Typical Expectations	Reality
Stay calm and not panic	GOOD IDEA
Stay put	UNREALISTIC
Follow directions of staff/ rescue situation	GOOD IDEA

"Stay put" is unrealistic because no one is going to be passive and patient for 12 hours. Clients will need to move around, eat, use restrooms, sleep, play games, etc. Before night falls, they need to be ready to spend the night perhaps in the open air.

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**To sum up in a sentence:** For the first 12 hours after a major earthquake, agency staff are responsible for almost everything that needs to happen.

In advance of a major quake, agency staff need to discuss among themselves, and with clients and appropriate caregivers, what is going to happen in the post-quake 12 hours and who is going to do what.

It may be helpful to draw a 10 am to 10 pm time line. At 10:15 am on the line, label that point "staff and clients evacuate to safe area away from building." **Now, what are staff and clients going to do for the next 11 and three quarters hours?**