

Beyond Maintenance: Facility Management's Pivotal Role in Disaster Resilience and Risk Management

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In the face of disasters, the critical role of Facility Management (FM) often goes unnoticed. These professionals are at the forefront of protecting and maintaining our facilities against the backdrop of a world where the frequency and intensity of disasters—ranging from natural catastrophes and pandemics to technological failures—are on the rise.

Such events not only test the resilience of our society and businesses but also highlight the indispensable role of FM in ensuring preparedness, effective response, and swift recovery.

Understanding the Role of FM in Disaster Preparedness

Facility Management (FM) plays a critical role in disaster preparedness, going beyond the traditional upkeep of physical spaces to become strategic players in ensuring safety and continuity during crises. This expanded role covers a vast array of responsibilities, including risk assessment, emergency planning, and the integration of FM into broader disaster response strategies, crucial for making disaster response more efficient and safer:

In-depth Risk Assessment and Strategic Planning

FM professionals begin their disaster preparedness process with a thorough risk assessment, focusing on identifying potential hazards and assessing the vulnerability of their facilities. This involves pinpointing essential services such as power, water, and communications, which are crucial for operational continuity during disasters. For instance, in earthquake-prone regions, FM teams reinforce buildings and infrastructure, a practice supported by research indicating that seismic retrofitting can reduce the risk of major structural damage by up to **80%** according to the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute.

Seamless Integration with Emergency Response

FM's role extends to the seamless integration into emergency response strategies, which is vital for a coordinated approach during crises. Detailed plans for evacuation, shelter-in-place, and lockdowns are crafted, ensuring that escape routes and emergency assembly points are well-planned and communicated to all occupants. The importance of collaboration with local emergency services is underscored by **studies** showing that coordinated responses between facilities managers and emergency services can significantly reduce response times and improve overall disaster management efficiency.

Technology Utilisation for Enhanced Safety

The application of technology in FM has brought significant advancements in disaster response. Early warning systems, particularly in regions susceptible to natural disasters, and the implementation of smart building technologies allow for real-time monitoring and control of building systems. For example, the use of IoT devices in FM has shown to enhance the capacity for quick responses to changing conditions during disasters, with data indicating that smart building technologies can reduce emergency response times by up to 30%, according to the Smart Buildings Institute.

Prioritising Occupant Well-Being

FM's commitment to disaster preparedness also prioritises the well-being of building occupants. This includes not just physical safety measures but also considerations for mental health, such as designing spaces that offer psychological comfort during emergencies. Ensuring the inclusivity of disaster preparedness plans, especially for individuals with disabilities, is also a key focus. Research from the American Psychological Association highlights that well-designed emergency shelter areas that consider psychological factors can significantly reduce stress and anxiety levels among occupants during disasters.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The role of FM in disaster preparedness is dynamic, requiring continuous improvement and adaptation. Regular training and drills are essential to ensure that occupants are familiar with emergency procedures, and post-disaster reviews are critical for analysing the effectiveness of responses to past events. A study by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) emphasises the importance of these reviews, revealing that continuous training can improve overall disaster preparedness effectiveness by up to 40%.

The role of FM in disaster preparedness and response is multifaceted and critical. By combining thorough risk assessment, strategic emergency planning, technological integration, a focus on occupant safety and well-being, and a commitment to continuous improvement, FM professionals significantly enhance the efficiency and safety of disaster response. The integration of data and research into their strategies further strengthens their capacity to respond effectively to crises.

Learning from Real-World Examples: FM in Action

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge, reshaping the role of FM significantly. Facilities, both public and private, had to be quickly repurposed to address the crisis. This included transforming hotels into quarantine zones, convention centres into makeshift hospitals, and educational institutions into remote learning hubs. Facility managers played a crucial role in these transitions, managing logistics, ensuring compliance with health guidelines, and retrofitting air filtration systems to mitigate virus spread. Their efforts highlighted not just the adaptability but also the essential role of FM in public health and safety. Below are some short examples of how FM is crucial amidst various unprecedented events:

1. Hospital FM During the Pandemic

Many hospitals worldwide had to rapidly expand their capacity, requiring quick modifications to existing facilities. FM teams implemented new ventilation systems and converted spaces to accommodate COVID-19 patients, playing a crucial role in managing the healthcare crisis.

2. FM in Wildfire-Affected Areas

In regions affected by wildfires, FM teams have been crucial in implementing preventive measures like creating defensible spaces, installing fire-resistant materials, and preparing evacuation routes.

3. Educational Institutions During Lockdowns

Universities and schools faced the challenge of transitioning to remote learning while maintaining their facilities. FM teams had to ensure the security and maintenance of empty buildings and prepare for eventual reopening with new safety measures. [Facilities management in educational organisations](#) is already a crucial yet overlooked area in many instances, however in instances like the pandemic, the value of effective facilities management is evident.

These instances underscore the evolving nature of FM, demonstrating its essential role in not just maintaining but also transforming spaces in response to crisis situations. The lessons learned from these events continue to shape FM strategies, ensuring that facilities are better prepared for future challenges.

Conclusion

The intersection of FM and disaster preparedness is a critical juncture for our society. As we face an uncertain future, the role of FM in building a safer, more resilient world becomes ever more paramount. Facility managers, business leaders, and emergency responders must champion this role, continuously evolving and adapting to the challenges ahead. Preparedness today is indeed the foundation of resilience tomorrow.