

SAF-113
PERSONAL SAFETY

Modified from a Waller County ARES training article.

Emergency communication volunteers may become so involved with helping others that they forget about their own families and themselves. The needs of victims may seem so large when compared with your own that you may feel guilty even taking a moment for your own basic personal needs. However, if you are to continue to assist others, you must keep yourself in good condition. If not, you risk becoming part of the problem. If your family is not safe and all their needs taken care of, worrying about them may prevent you from doing your job.

Home and Family

Before leaving for a deployment, make sure you make all the necessary arrangements for your home and family. Family members, and friends or neighbors, should know where you are going, when you plan to return, and a way to get a message to you in an emergency. If you live in the disaster area or in the path of a storm, consider moving your family to a safe location before beginning your duties. Take whatever steps you can to protect your own property from damage. In addition to your emergency communication deployment checklists, you might want to create a home and family checklist. It should cover all their needs while you are gone. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Home:

- Board up windows if you are in a storm's path,
- Put lawn furniture and loose objects indoors if high winds are likely,
- Drain pipes if below freezing temperatures and power loss is possible,
- Shut off power and gas if practical and if structural damage is possible.

Family

- Safe place to stay if needed, preferably with friends or relatives,
- Reliable transportation, with fuel tank filled,
- Adequate cash money for regular needs and emergencies (remember the ATM and credit card machines may not work if the power is lost),
- House, auto, life, and health insurance information to take along if evacuated,
- Access to important legal documents such as wills, property deeds, etc.
- Emergency food and water supply,
- AM/FM radio and extra batteries,
- Flashlight and extra batteries, bulbs,
- Adequate supply of prescription medications on hand,
- List of emergency phone numbers (most people rely on cell phones for phone list and do not have numbers memorized),
- Pet supplies and arrangements (shelters will not take pets),
- List of people to call for assistance,
- Maps and emergency escape routes,
- A way to contact each other,
- A plan for reuniting later.

Should you leave at all?

There are times when your family may need you as much or more than your emcomm group. Obviously, this is a decision that only you and your family can make. If a family member is ill, your spouse is unsure of their ability to cope without you, if evacuation will be difficult, or any similar concern arises, staying with them may be a better choice. If there is ever any doubt, your decision must be to stay with your family. This is also something you should discuss, and come to an agreement with your spouse about well before any disaster, in order to avoid any last minute problems.

You Come First – Your Deployment Comes Second

Once you are deployed, you still need to take care of yourself. If you become over-tired, ill, or weak, you cannot do your job properly. If you do not take care of personal cleanliness, you could become unpleasant to be around. Whenever possible, each station should have at least two operators on duty so that one can take a break for sleep, food and personal hygiene. If that is not possible, work out a schedule with the NCS to take periodic "off-duty" breaks.

Food

Most people need at least 2000 calories a day to function well. In a stressful situation or one with a great deal of physical activity you may need even more. If you are at a regular shelter, at least some of your food needs will probably be taken care of. In other situations, you may be on your own, at least for a while. High calorie and high protein snacks will help keep you going, but you will also need food that is more substantial. You may need to bring along some freeze-dried camping food, a small pot, and a camp stove with fuel, or some self-heating military surplus "Meal, Ready to Eat" (MRE) packages.

Water

Safe water supplies can be difficult to find during and after many disasters. You will need at least two or three liters of water each day, just for drinking, more for other purposes. In extremely hot or cold conditions, or with increased physical activity, your needs will increase significantly. Most disaster preparedness checklists suggest at least one gallon per person, per day. Many camping supply stores offer a range of water filters and purification tablets that can help make local water supplies safer. However, they all have limitations you should be aware of. Filters may or may not remove all potentially harmful organisms or discoloration, depending on the type. Iodine-saturated filters will kill or remove most harmful germs and bacteria, but are more expensive and you may have a faint taste of iodine to the water. Some people are allergic to ingested iodine. All water filters require care in their use to avoid cross-contamination of purified water with dirty water. Be sure to read and understand the information that comes with any water purification device or tablet before purchasing or using it.

The FDA says you can use plain Clorox laundry bleach (no perfumes, etc). After filtering out any particulate by pouring it through several layers of dense cloth, put sixteen drops of Clorox in a gallon of water, mix well, and allow it to sit for thirty minutes. If it still smells slightly of chlorine, you can use it. If not, stir in sixteen more drops and wait another half hour. If it still does not smell of chlorine, discard the water and find a new supply. It will not taste great, but it may be enough.

If you have no other means, boiling for at least five minutes will kill any bacteria, but will not remove any particulate matter or discoloration. Boiling will leave water with a "flat" taste that can be improved by pouring it back and forth between two containers several times to reintroduce some oxygen.

Sleep

Try to get at least six continuous hours of sleep in every twenty-four hour period, or four continuous hours and several shorter naps. Bring fresh soft foam earplugs and a black eye mask to ensure that light and noise around you are not a problem. A sleeping bag, foam pad or air mattress, and your own pillow will help give you the best chance of getting adequate rest. If caffeine keeps you awake, try to stop drinking coffee, tea, or other beverages containing caffeine at least four hours before going to bed. Allowing yourself to become over-tired can also make falling asleep difficult.

Personal Hygiene

If you pack only a few personal items, be sure they include toothpaste and toothbrush, a comb, and deodorant. If possible, bring a bar of soap or waterless hand cleaner, a small towel and washcloth, and a few extra shirts. Waterless shampoo is available from many camping stores. After two or three days without bathing, you can become rather unpleasant to be around -- think of others and make an attempt to stay as clean and well-groomed as you can under the circumstances.

Safety in an Unsafe Situation

Many disaster assignments are in unsafe places. Natural disasters can bring flying or falling debris, high or fast moving water, fire, explosions, building collapse, disease, toxic chemicals, and a variety of other dangers. You should always be aware of your surroundings and the dangers they hold. Never place yourself in a position where you might be trapped, injured, or killed. Try to anticipate what might happen and plan ahead. Always have an escape plan ready in the event that conditions suddenly become dangerous. Do not allow yourself to become "cornered" -- always have more than one escape route from buildings and hazardous areas.

Wear appropriate clothing. Depending on the weather, you might include a hard hat, rain gear, warm non-cotton layers, work gloves, and waterproof boots. Always bring several pairs of non-cotton socks and change them often to keep your feet clean and dry. Create seasonal clothing lists suitable for your climate and the types of disasters you might encounter. As a volunteer communicator, you will not generally be expected to enter environments that require specialized protective clothing or equipment. Do not worry about purchasing these items unless required by your served agency.

Avoid potentially dangerous areas. Be aware that industrial buildings or facilities may contain toxic chemicals, which can be released in a disaster. Dams can break, bridges can wash out, and buildings can collapse. Areas can become inaccessible due to flooding, landslides, collapsed structures, advancing fires, or storm surges. If you can avoid being in harm's way, you can also prevent yourself from becoming part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Be prepared to help others find or rescue you should you become trapped or isolated. Carry a police or signal whistle and a chemical light stick or small flashlight in your pocket. Let others

know where you are going if you must travel anywhere, even within a "safe" building. Try not to travel alone -- bring someone along with you.

Shelter

In most cases, you will not need your own shelter for operating or sleeping. You may be able to stay or work in the emergency operations center, evacuation shelter, or even your own vehicle. However, in some cases a tent, camp trailer, motor home, or other suitable shelter may be necessary. Your choice will depend on your needs and resources.

Tents should be rated for high winds, and should be designed to be waterproof in heavy weather. Most inexpensive family camping tents will not survive difficult conditions. Dome tents will shed wind well, but look for published "wind survival" ratings since not all dome designs are equal. Your tent should have a full-coverage rain fly rather than a single waterproof fabric. The tent's bottom should be waterproof, extending up the sidewalls at least six inches in a "bath-tub" design, but bring an extra sheet of plastic to line the *inside* just in case. (Placing a plastic ground cloth under a tent will allow rain to quickly run under and through a leaky tent floor). Bring extra nylon cord and long ground stakes to help secure the tent in windy conditions. If you are not an experienced foul weather camper, consider consulting a reputable local outfitter or camping club for advice on selecting and using a tent.

Some Thoughts on Medical Needs:

If you have a medical condition that could potentially interfere with your ability to do your job, it is a good idea to discuss this with your physician ahead of time. For instance, if you are a diabetic, you will need to avoid going for long periods without proper food or medication, and stress may affect your blood sugar level. Persons with heart problems may need to avoid stressful situations. Even if your doctor says you can participate safely, be sure you have an adequate supply of appropriate medications on hand, and a copy of any prescriptions. Let your emcomm manager and any work partners know of your condition so that they can take appropriate actions if something goes wrong. Keep a copy of any special medical information and emergency phone numbers in your wallet at all times.

Eyes and Sight

If you wear eyeglasses or contact lenses, bring at least one spare pair. If you use disposable contact lenses, bring more than enough changes to avoid running out. Some contact lens wearers may want to switch to glasses to avoid having to deal with lens removal and cleaning under field conditions. If you have any doubts, consult your eye doctor ahead of time. Bringing a copy of your lens prescription along may also be a good idea, especially if you are likely to be some distance from home for a while.

Sunglasses may be a necessity in some situations. Working without them in bright sun can cause fatigue, and possibly eye damage. If you are in an area with large expanses of snow or white sand, prolonged periods of exposure can cause the retina to be burned, a very painful condition commonly known as "snow blindness". Since no painkiller will help with retinal burns, it is best to use good quality UV blocking sunglasses at all times, and avoid prolonged exposure.

If you do not normally wear eyeglasses, consider a pair of industrial safety glasses or goggles to protect your eyes from wind-blown water, dust, and debris. Keep all spare eyeglasses or safety glasses/goggles in a felt-lined hard-shell storage case to prevent scratching and breakage.

“Ready kits” have been discussed before, but revisit the items in the list below to ensure you have what is needed:

Sample Checklist (Modify according to your own situation)

- Suitable size backpack or duffel bag for clothing and personal gear
- Plastic storage tub for food, cooking gear
- Toilet kit -- soap, comb, deodorant, shampoo, toothbrush, toothpaste
- Toilet paper in zipper-lock freezer bag
- Small towel and washcloth
- Lip balm
- Facial tissues
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Prescription medications (1 week supply)
- Copies of medication and eyeglass/contact lens prescriptions
- Spare eyeglasses or contact lenses and supplies
- Hand lotion for dry skin
- Small first aid kit
- Non-prescription medications, including painkiller, antacids, anti-diarrheal, etc.
- Extra basic clothing -- shirts, socks, underwear
- Gloves, for protection or warmth
- Pocket flashlight
- Folding pocket knife
- Sleeping bag, closed-cell foam pad or air mattress, pillow
- Ear plugs (soft foam type in sealed package)
- Black eye mask
- Outer clothing for season and conditions (rain gear, parka, hat, face mask, etc)
- Hard hat
- Reflective vest, hat
- Travel alarm clock
- Chemical light sticks
- Police or signal whistle
- Dust masks
- Phone/email/address list for family, friends, neighbors, physician, pharmacy
- Emergency contact/medical information card in your wallet
- Spare car and house keys
- High energy or high protein snacks
- Food -- Freeze-dried or MREs
- Coffee, tea, drink mixes
- Plate or bowl, knife, fork and spoon, insulated mug
- Camp stove, small pot, fuel and matches
- Battery or other lantern
- Water, in heavy plastic jugs
- Water purification filter or tablets
- Magnetic compass, maps
- Duct tape, parachute cord

Consider packing individual items or kits in zipper-lock freezer bags to keep the contents dry, clean, and neat.

Links related to the discussion:

FEMA Disaster Safety Information: <https://www.ready.gov/prepare-for-emergencies>

American Red Cross -- Disaster Safety:
<http://www.redcross.org/get-help/prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies>

Disaster Information: <https://ncdisaster.ces.ncsu.edu/>

Food: <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/pubs/current/FDNS-E-34-CS.html>

Water: <https://www.bae.ncsu.edu/extension/ext-publications/water/drinking/emergwatersupply-minner.pdf>

Institute for Home and Business Safety: <https://disastersafety.org/>

Univ. of Florida -- Disaster safety tips: <http://news.ifas.ufl.edu/category/families-and-consumers/disaster-preparedness/>