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Virginia Workplace Law

Are You Prepared For An Emergency In The Workplace?

By: Karen Elliott. *This was posted Thursday, October 14th, 2010*

Here's an especially timely (from our point of view) post from my colleague Annemarie Cleary about Emergency Action Plans.

It was a normal day around the office last Thursday when the lights flickered. The power didn't go off so we continued to work; but soon we realized smoke was rising past the 23rd floor windows and sirens were wailing outside. As we looked out the windows and down to the street, word began to spread that a transformer under the sidewalk in front of the building had blown. It wasn't too much longer before the fire alarm sounded and we began our trek down 23 flights of stairs. As you can imagine, it was easier for some than for others. Once we arrived on the ground level, a policeman directed us past red tape barriers.

These events underscore the importance and need for having Emergency Action Plans ("EAPs"). Under Occupational Safety Health Administration ("OSHA") regulations, most businesses are required to have an EAP. As an employer, the benefits of having a plan extend beyond mere compliance with the regulations. It makes good sense to develop or update an existing plan to protect your employees and to get your business back to work as quickly as possible.

The Department of Labor, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), Homeland Security and OSHA all offer tools and information on their websites that are useful in developing or updating your company's EAP. Other sources of information include your local fire department and your insurance carrier, both of which may provide consultation programs to assist in the preparation of an EAP. In multiple-story buildings, it is common for landlords to publish evacuation plans for the building.

One of the most important and consistent recommendations made at each of the web sites listed above is that you prepare your plan with input from your employees, especially those with special needs who might have difficulty evacuating in the case of an emergency. Ask workers about their personal evacuation concerns and needs. Based on their responses, you might assign floor wardens to ensure that those who need help evacuating receive it. Your plan should also establish evacuation routes and be posted for all employees to see.

But evacuation should not be the end of your plan. You should establish a system to account for all employees after the evacuation is complete. For example, you might designate a primary and secondary meeting place outside your building and charge someone with having a checklist to ensure that all employees have made it out safely. This way, you can alert emergency responders to employees who might be stuck in the building and where.

Once you have developed your EAP, be sure to distribute it to employees, including new hires, to practice your EAP regularly, and to review it often to ensure it is current. Having an EAP can limit injuries and damages, and get your business back on track quickly.