

## Deciding When and How to “Shelter-in-Place”

By Kimberly Matlon, JD

There may come a time when it is safer for you and your employees to stay inside, rather than to evacuate. Knowing when, and how, to shelter-in-place is key to surviving when hazardous contaminants are released into the air, or when there is a gunman waiting to fire on people as they are evacuating the premises.

A common misconception is comparing a shelter-in-place program to escaping to a bomb, fallout, or storm shelter. This is not the same thing. During shelter-in-place, you do not want to seal yourself off from the outside world completely. Instead, you will want to go to a small, interior room within your facility that has few or no windows, and follow clear instructions laid out ahead of time.

Your shelter-in-place rooms should provide at least 10 square feet per person sheltered.<sup>1</sup> Keep emergency kits stored in the rooms, which should include a first aid kit, drinking water, food rations, flashlight with fresh batteries, plastic sheeting, duct tape, a land-line telephone, and a radio or television set with fresh batteries.

Employees need to be trained, preferably through scenario-based exercises, on the use of the shelter-in-place plan, just like any other part of your business continuity program. The purpose is to ensure they understand what roles they have, and who is responsible for what portion of implementing the shelter-in-place program.

Generally, you will receive advice to shelter-in-place from local authorities. However, the time may come when you, or someone at your facility, will need to make the decision to shelter-in-place or evacuate. The decision is, of course, based on all information available regarding the immediacy of the danger. Carefully assess the situation. Look and listen! If there is noticeable debris in the air, or if you have received word that there are a large number of contaminants in the air, you may wish to choose to shelter-in-place. Listen to the news organizations assessment of the situation, but don't listen to only one. You will get a clearer picture of what is happening outside of your facility by getting as much information from as many sources as possible. Always take what local authorities are advising or informing you over the word of the media, but don't disregard the media if you have not gotten word from the local authorities. Keep your eyes and ears peeled for official statements and instructions as they become available.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Shelter In Place At Your Office*, National Institute for Chemical Studies, 2003, p.3.

Once shelter-in-place has been advised by local authorities, or decided based upon your team's information, close your business, immediately. Begin by making an announcement to all employees, clients, customers and visitors. Make sure you stress to your clients, customers and visitors that they are safer if they stay inside the facility. Begin moving people to the shelter-in-place rooms. Ask employees, clients, customers and visitors not to use their cell phones to call their emergency contacts until further notice is given for the "go-ahead". Explain it will just be a small matter of time. Ask for their support and adherence to policy.

Close and lock all exterior doors and windows. Post a sign on your main entrance that the facility is under controlled entry. Turn on answering systems notifying the public that the business is temporarily closed, and indicate that staff and visitors are remaining in the building until local authorities state it is safe for them to leave the facility. Your facilities crew should turn off all heating, air conditioning and other air vents to prevent outside air from coming indoors.

Once the facility is sealed, begin calling emergency contacts. Be aware, cellular lines may be overwhelmed and therefore useless during this type of emergency. Keep in mind, you want to keep at least one main line open to the facility to receive emergency communications from the local authorities. Keep track of your employees, clients, customers and visitors. Know who is in which shelter-in-place room, and the well-being of each person. In case of a medical emergency, call 9-1-1 immediately. Otherwise, do not overwhelm the emergency telephone system.

Once you receive the "all clear" from the local authorities, have everyone systematically leave the building to a pre-arranged meeting area. Be sure to account for all persons who were sheltered in place, even if they are not one of your employees. Open the windows and doors to the facility to let it begin to air out. Turn on the heat, air conditioner or other air vents. Begin returning the facility back to a state of "normalcy." After the event, be sure to restock your emergency shelter-in-place supply kit.

Although it is difficult to plan, practice and implement a shelter-in-place program, it is important that your employees understand and believe in the shelter-in-place process in order to prevent unnecessary panic and possible evacuation into a highly dangerous situation. Take the time to detail a shelter-in-place program, train your staff and be prepared in case shelter-in-place becomes warranted.

**[Get more valuable information at the R&A Crisis Management Services website.](http://www.raconsulting.net)**  
**<http://www.raconsulting.net>**