
PURPOSE
Suggests Best Practices in the area of training, tests, and exercises (TT&E) for continuity of operations (COOP) plans.

SUMMARY
A COOP plan must include a regular TT&E schedule. Familiarity with COOP plans and procedures can be fostered through tests, orientation, training, table-top exercises, and full-scale exercises. TT&E can test the effectiveness of COOP plans and ensure efficient COOP plan implementation. An agency head or lead organization should eventually evaluate the COOP plan and certify it when satisfied that the agency can adequately implement it.

DESCRIPTION
Full implementation of a COOP plan may be infrequent, making TT&E a valuable tool for maintaining readiness. For employees in government agencies without emergency response roles, training and exercises will be the key to familiarizing them with the COOP plan and with emergency operations in general.

Training
All personnel who will be involved in a COOP event should receive proper training in COOP concepts, their role in COOP implementation, and emergency procedures including the Incident Command System (ICS). Agencies should develop a training plan which includes a roster of all key personnel who must receive training. The roster should be updated as employees leave and new personnel arrive.

Orientation
All personnel in the agency should receive an orientation to COOP procedures and their role in a COOP event. This orientation should make non-essential personnel aware of notification, evacuation, and other important emergency procedures. New employees should receive an orientation at the start of their employment and annual reorientation should occur agency-wide.

According to the General Services Administration Model Agency COOP plan, COOP training should not attempt to train personnel on day-to-day tasks and normal operations. The focus should be on performing emergency tasks, potentially from an alternate facility, with unfamiliar equipment and systems.

The Ohio Emergency Management Agency conducts "key leader" training for all state agency heads. This awareness training for executives helps secure support and makes agency heads aware of the importance of COOP planning.
Advanced Training
Employees with more complex roles in the COOP plan will require additional training. The level and type of training will vary based on roles of the audience. The agency COOP point of contact (POC), for example, should be trained in all aspects of plan development and implementation in a “train the trainer” model. Varying types of advanced training should be provided to the following groups:

- Agency COOP POC;
- COOP Team Members;
- Agency Management;
- Agency Division Management;
- Key Agency Personnel;
- Information Technology Personnel;
- Personnel that will be delegated authorities; and
- Successors in the order of succession plan.

Tests
COOP planners should perform regular tests to measure the performance of equipment and systems that will be used during implementation. Tests should be scheduled two or three times a year, and always after an agency acquires new systems, equipment, or facilities. For example, communications equipment at the alternate facility should be tested to ensure it can provide adequate levels of service. COOP planners should test alert and notification systems, vital records programs, communications systems, and the alternate facility.

Alert and Notification
To test these systems, agencies should send test alerts and notifications to each channel of communication and check to see if all were received and acted upon. Similarly, agencies should regularly test the emergency notification system to check their accuracy.

Records and Systems
These systems should be tested to ensure that vital records and documents are pre-positioned at the alternate facility or ready to be transported at the primary facility. Agencies should transport documents and systems to the alternate facility, use the systems there, and record any problems or glitches the systems have when used for expected tasks.

Communications
COOP planners should test all backup communications systems to see if they are working properly. Agencies can work with vendors to ensure that backup systems are available whenever they might be needed.

Alternate Facility Operations
To test alternate facility operations, an agency should evacuate and relocate to the alternate facility on short notice and determine if the building has adequate power, food, water, air conditioning, heating, and other important resources.
Exercises
Agencies should develop a regular exercise schedule for their COOP plan, with each exercise varying in format, scope, and audience. Exercises should occur regularly to test preparedness, and should occur after major changes or revisions to the COOP plan, supporting systems, or personnel.

Table-top
Table-top exercises are a good first step in an exercise program. During table-top exercises, agency staff meet to discuss hypothetical situations and discuss aspects of plan implementation. A key goal of the table-top exercise should be to increase familiarity with plans and procedures amongst the participants and at the same time to test plan elements. Agencies should have a table-top exercise for important stakeholders in similar areas, such as information technology professionals, agency heads, and finance officers. Employees with common functions will be able to identify specific areas needing improvement.

Full-scale
An annual exercise of the COOP plan, including relocation and operation at an alternate facility, will help COOP planners understand the strengths and weaknesses of the plan and adapt it accordingly. The conditions for the exercise should mirror an authentic emergency situation. Scenarios should be developed that reflect risks associated with an agency and/or jurisdiction’s risk assessment or business impact analysis. Agencies should consider creating special scenarios for full-scale exercises, such as removing key leaders from the exercise, to test key aspects of the plan such as orders of succession and delegations of authority.

Exercise Evaluation
After any exercise, a detailed after-action report (AAR) should be drafted as part of overall exercise evaluation. An exercise evaluation team, which does not participate in the actual exercise, should monitor the exercise and record exercise data. Problems and lessons learned should be extracted from the AAR, and should lead directly to corrective actions including possible plan revisions. Future exercises should test these areas of concern. Problems and lessons learned must be incorporated into the multi-year strategic plan and addressed in the future.

Lessons Learned Information Sharing contains numerous AARs demonstrating the type of reporting that responder organizations do following an exercise. They can be accessed at https://www.llis.dhs.gov/member/secure/listing.cfm?content_type=AAR.
Certification
The jurisdiction’s chief elected official, continuity planner, or other authorized organization should certify each agency’s COOP plan to confirm that the plan is effective and efficient and that all personnel are familiar with implementation. The Maryland State Agency COOP Planning Guide Worksheet 27 is a useful checklist for certification of a COOP plan.

An agency head can certify the plan in steps instead of at the end, i.e., certifying essential functions, then alternate operating locations, then a communications plan, etc. The agency charged with coordinating COOP planning for the entire jurisdiction, usually an emergency management agency or administrative agency, should also review and certify the COOP plan.

REFERENCES

Standards

- 5.13.1. "The entity shall evaluate program plans, procedures, and capabilities through periodic reviews, testing, post-incident reports, lessons learned, performance evaluations, and exercises.
- 5.13.2. "Exercises shall be designed to test individual essential elements, interrelated elements, or the entire plan(s).
- 5.13.3. "Procedures shall be established to ensure that corrective action is taken on any deficiency identified in the evaluation process and to revise the relevant program plan."
- A.5.13.2. "Exercises should include, but not be limited to, table tops, simulations, and full operational exercises."

The State of Maine organized a COOP subcommittee of the Governor’s Homeland Security Taskforce. The subcommittee coordinates all COOP planning and eventually reviews and certifies all agency COOP plans. The subcommittee consisted of representatives from nine major state agencies, including the Maine Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Administrative and Financial Services, which coordinates overall state COOP planning.
Links

- State of Maine Continuity of Operations Subcommittee: http://www.state.me.us/newsletter/April2002/governor.htm

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