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BEST PRACTICE

State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Elements of a Continuity of Operations Plan

PURPOSE

Describes the common elements of a continuity of operations (COOP) plan.

SUMMARY

COOP planning encompasses three types of plans that describe how the plan will be developed and carried out. Jurisdictions should begin by developing a strategic plan for achieving COOP goals. The basic COOP plan itself will include key elements such as the identification of essential functions, delegation of authorities, order of succession, protection of vital documents and systems, alternate operating locations, communications plans, and a plan for tests, training, and exercises. Finally, each agency must develop a response plan that details the initiation, implementation, and termination of the COOP plan.

DESCRIPTION

A COOP plan combines many smaller sub-plans into an entire program for maintaining the essential functions of an organization in any emergency or non-emergency situation. The following are key parts of the overall process:

- A multi-year strategic plan to map out long-term COOP goals.
- The basic COOP plan, which discusses (1) purpose, applicability, and other administrative items, and (2) the identification and protection of essential functions, personnel, and resources.
- Response plans that describe exactly how an agency will activate the plan and accomplish continuity of operations.

COOP Plan Templates

- [FEMA Interim COOP Guidance Appendix E](#)
- [Florida Division of Emergency Management COOP Plan Outline](#)
- [General Services Administration Continuity of Operations Plan 2002 Template](#)
- [Maryland State Agency COOP Planning Guide Appendix B-2](#)
- [North Dakota Continuum of Government Plan Template](#)
- [Wisconsin Model County COOP Plan](#)

This Best Practice document describes several aspects of COOP plans; many templates exist for adaptation in an individual agency or jurisdiction. Although templates are useful for mapping out the COOP plan, many continuity planners recommend against relying too heavily on outlines, worksheets, and templates. It is important for jurisdiction and agencies to “own” the COOP process by participating in the actual planning and development of the plan.

Multi-Year Strategic Plan

Agencies should develop a multi-year strategic plan for COOP. A multi-year plan sets out the goals for long-term COOP planning and maps out the strategy for achieving them. The multi-year plan develops requirements, timelines, and a course of action for achieving key COOP goals. It also assists in developing budget requirements. Gaps or shortfall in the initial COOP plan, such as lack of a “warm-site” for an alternate location or inadequate backup communications systems, can be planned for and addressed in future budgets through the multi-year plan. Florida’s [Sample Multi-Year Strategy and Program Management](#) document is a useful model.

Elements of a Basic COOP Plan

The following section headings are elements of any COOP plan. Examples are from the [General Services Administration](#) (GSA) COOP plan template:

Purpose/Objective

This section states the purpose or objective of the COOP plan. The section should clearly indicate that the plan seeks to maintain only critical services during emergencies. Example:

“This COOP provides guidance for, and facilitates the preparation of, site- or activity-specific plans and procedures that help ensure the safety of [Insert agency name] personnel at [Insert agency address] and allow [Insert agency name] organizational elements to continue essential operations in the event of an emergency or threat of an emergency. The planning guidance and the plans to be developed in accordance with it do not address day-to-day activities that enable an organization to conduct or safeguard routine operations.”

Applicability and Scope

This section describes who and what the plan applies to, under what circumstances, and with what limitations. Example:

“The provisions of this COOP are applicable to all [Insert agency name] personnel located at [Insert your agency address and include your zip code]. This plan is applicable to the full spectrum of man-made, natural, and technological emergencies and threats, with the exception of civil defense matters, which are addressed in other documentation.”

Sensitivity

A COOP plan discusses sensitive topics related to a government’s emergency response, including information on vulnerabilities. Distribution should be limited to government employees and support personnel. The COOP plan should be designated as “for official use only” or something similar. Planners should consult with legal counsel regarding issues related to freedom of information requirements and sunshine law issues.

Authorities and References

The COOP plan must list state and local ordinances and statutes that affect government, emergency, and continuity planning, such as the state emergency management acts, local emergency operations plans, authorizing laws and executive decisions, etc. This section refers future readers to relevant plans and authorizing documents.

Identification of Essential Functions and Critical Services

Every COOP plan **must** delineate the essential functions, services, and activities carried out by the agency. The plan must also identify the personnel, facilities, and resources required for each function or service. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing Best*

Practice: [“State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Identifying Essential Functions.”](#)

Alternate Operating Locations and Facilities

The loss of a primary operating facility must be accounted for in a COOP plan. A plan should identify alternate facilities that enable the agency to re-establish critical services within 12 hours following the loss of the primary facility. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Alternate Operating Locations.](#)"

Protection of Vital Records, Databases, and Systems

Vital records, databases, and information technology systems support agency essential functions and must be protected. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Vital Records and Systems.](#)"

Delegation of Authority to Key Personnel

The authority to make key emergency decisions during a COOP event must be clear and compliant with state and local law. COOP plans must delineate and limit the authority that key COOP personnel will have during an event. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Delegations of Authority.](#)"

Orders of Succession for Key Personnel

The loss of an agency or department of head and others in key positions requires detailed orders of succession. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Orders of Succession.](#)"

Tests, Training, and Exercises

Agency employees must participate in training and exercises to familiarize themselves with emergency procedures and their role in COOP response. Please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Tests, Training, and Exercises.](#)"

COOP Implementation Plans

Agencies must prepare plans for implementing each element of the COOP plan throughout the period of disruption, from initial activation to final reconstitution. This "plan for the plan" will describe procedures, roles and responsibilities, and command structure for the COOP plan.

Phases of COOP Implementation

COOP events will often require evacuation, relocation, and other emergency responses. The COOP plan must outline all phases of the agency's response plan, including information on relocation teams, takeaway kits, and eventual return to normal operations.

Based on federal guidance, COOP plan implementation consists of four steps: activation, relocation, creation of alternate facility operations, and resumption of normal operations.

- **Activation.** Criteria should first be developed to guide decision makers on whether to implement part or all of the COOP plan. The authority for making the decision should be pre-delegated to an agency head or group of agency leaders who can make the executive decision. A plan for notifications must also be developed; all personnel should be notified of COOP plan implementation. For more information on

notification, see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: "[State and Local Government Continuity of Operations Planning: Communications.](#)"

- **Relocation.** Relocation plans detail the deliberate and pre-planned transportation of critical agency personnel and supporting resources to an alternate facility. Responsibilities for transporting takeaway kits should be clearly defined.
- **Creation of Alternate Facility Operations.** Agencies should develop procedures for assigning responsibilities to COOP personnel at the alternate facility, executing essential functions, and addressing public information.
- **Termination and Resumption of Normal Operations.** Termination plans detail the breaking down the alternate facility, recalling of personnel, and resumption of normal business functions at a primary facility.

Classification of Emergencies and COOP Responses

Many of the incidents requiring COOP implementation will be small in scale and occur frequently. Agencies should define the severity of emergencies and tailor the level of COOP plan implementation to meet their needs. The [Maryland State Agencies COOP Planning Manual](#) classifies emergencies in one of five categories, listed in the table below. The table should serve as a guide only; the actual decisions for the scale of implementation should be made by the appropriate person or body.

Class/Level of Emergency	Impact on Agency
I	Disruption of up to 12 hours, with little effect on services or impact to essential functions or critical systems. No COOP activation required, depending on individual agency requirements.
II	Disruption of 12 to 72 hours, with minor impact on essential functions. Limited COOP activation, depending on individual agency requirements.
III	Disruption to one or two essential functions or to a vital system for no more than three days. May require movement of some personnel to an alternate work site or location in the primary facility for less than a week.
IV	Disruption to one or two essential functions or to the entire agency with potential of lasting for more than three days but less than fourteen days. May require activation of orders of succession for some key personnel. May require movement of some personnel to an alternate work site or location in the primary facility for more than a week.

Class/Level of Emergency	Impact on Agency
V	<p>Disruption to the entire agency with a potential for lasting at least fourteen days.</p> <p>Requires activation of orders of succession for some key personnel.</p> <p>Requires movement of many, if not all personnel, to an alternate work site for more than fourteen days.</p>

Incident Command System

The Incident Command System (ICS) and the [National Incident Management System \(NIMS\)](#) should be incorporated into COOP planning if possible. ICS describes the structure for command and control of the emergency and should be used when the COOP plan is activated. Tasks, roles, and responsibilities for evacuation and relocation flow from the ICS structure. Many agency employees will be unfamiliar with the concepts of ICS and NIMS, but COOP is a good way to introduce the topic. The [Emergency Management Institute](#) has a great deal of information on ICS.

Staff/Dependent Care Plans

The protection of personnel and their families is of paramount importance. Employees are unlikely to work at an alternate location for an extended period of time if their family is in danger. COOP plans should work out programs for shelter of dependents during relocation at the alternate location or a nearby facility.

REFERENCES

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([LLIS.gov ID# 10437](#))
- US Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Office of National Security Coordination. *Federal Preparedness Circular 65*, June 2004.
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Links

- Federal Emergency Management Institute:
<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is195.asp>
- National Incident Management System:
<http://www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/display?theme=14&content=3697>

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