



# Planning in advance for disasters and emergencies

**Question:** I am a solo practitioner in a small Midwestern town and recently dodged a bullet when a tornado ripped through a neighboring area. It made me think about what I would have done if the tornado had actually destroyed my office. Do you have any suggestions concerning what I and other counselors should do in the event of an emergency so that both our clients and our practices are protected?

**Answer:** You raise a very important concern. In just the past year, much of our country has been pounded by hurricanes, wildfires, mudslides or floods. Moreover, disasters can occur on a smaller scale (e.g., office burglaries, fires) and still have potentially devastating impacts on solo practitioners. Ethics and good risk management practices call for some advance planning that can often be accomplished with minimal effort.

There are three things that you and other counselors can do immediately. The first is to appoint a records custodian, as called for in Standard B.6.i. of the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*. This is also an important action item for counselors to take as a precaution against disability or death and in anticipation of planned retirement (see *privatepracticepreparedness.com*). Frequently, another independent counselor or a group of counselors in your area can agree in advance to step in and serve as records custodians for each other.

The second step is to create a business continuity plan. This is not as daunting as it might sound. You will want to think broadly about your essential counseling practice functions and processes and determine who else, besides yourself, should be involved. The plan should identify an alternative location where you may be able to serve clients and should specify how communication will be effectuated and how records might be accessed. The plan should also prescribe how the counseling practice will be restored to normal operations after the disaster.

The third step is to develop a preparedness checklist. Among the questions that you might think through and address:

- ❖ Is there an office evacuation plan directing how you, any staff members and your clients can safely leave the premises? Have you identified office exit routes, stairways, fire extinguishers and an automated external defibrillator? Do you have an emergency medical kit readily available, as well as water and simple food provisions?

- ❖ Do you have a list of emergency numbers readily available? If these numbers are on your cellphone, do you also have an easily accessible printed list in the event that cellular service is not available?

- ❖ Do you have the ability to access critical client records remotely? Do you have a backup computer off-site? Have

you safeguarded all electronic devices to comply with the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and state laws? Do you have information backed up and accessible in the event of critical technology failures? Have you tested these backup systems?

- ❖ Do you have ready access to accounts receivable, vendor accounts, utilities, etc., in the event that information is destroyed or you cannot access your office for a long period of time?

You may have other concerns particular to your own practice that you can add to the checklist. Counselors who have additional staff members will also want to plan for what will happen to those employees in the event of an emergency. Counselors with larger practices may wish to consider obtaining business interruption insurance to cover expenses and payroll while the office is closed. The important thing is to make plans *before* disaster strikes. ❖

Anne Marie “Nancy” Wheeler is an attorney licensed in Maryland and the District of Columbia. The information presented here is for educational purposes only. For specific legal advice, please consult your own local health care attorney.

Letters to the editor:  
[ct@counseling.org](mailto:ct@counseling.org)