



# Business continuity planning: 7 key considerations for service providers

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Health, education and community services are critical to community wellbeing. During periods of crisis, whether due to pandemic, bushfires, floods or social conflict, service providers are often among the front line responders, keeping people safe and assisting in recovery.

Sound business continuity planning plays a key role in helping organisations to prepare for extraordinary circumstances. Thinking through scenarios of disruption and their implications allows us to develop systems and strategies that can be deployed quickly and effectively when needed. Business continuity planning offers additional benefits by building flexibility and resilience into 'business as usual'.

This second article in our business continuity planning series outlines key issues for service providers to consider before, during and after periods of crisis.

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## The importance of business continuity planning

A business continuity plan prepares an organisation to continue operating during and after an incident or crisis. This can make the difference between a safe and effective response which enables much-needed services to continue, and a slow and poorly thought through approach that places staff, clients and organisational viability at risk.

Community-based service providers have added responsibilities during crisis periods. In addition to staff safety and organisational functioning, they must be ready to meet emerging needs of vulnerable people and communities.

During a flood, famine, pandemic, economic crisis or period of societal conflict, people in our communities will need increased support. How can you build resilience within your organisation, and with partner organisations, to play an effective role in response and recovery?

Seven key considerations will be important to think through for community service providers.

### Key areas to consider

1. How can we best support and supervise our staff during crisis?
2. How can we maintain communications during crisis?
3. How can we build robustness around critical organisational roles?
4. How can we change work locations if needed during crisis?
5. How can we ensure access to critical information during crisis?
6. How can we manage disruption to our supply chains during crisis?
7. How can we best support our clients and communities during crisis?

## 1. How can we best support and supervise our staff during crisis?

For any service provider organisation, people are the most important resource. All staff will need

to be provided with support and guidance throughout the period of disruption, and those most closely affected will need additional attention and follow-up. Be aware of the impact of both direct and vicarious trauma for staff.

#### During non-crisis periods

- Ensure that all staff, including volunteers, have effective and trusting supervision relationships in place and feel confident to access them as needed
- Build strong team cultures and peer support processes so that staff can look out for each other during periods of crisis

#### During and after crisis

- Remind staff of organisational policies in relation to personal health issues, leave and flexible work arrangements
- Adjust policies or normal working arrangements as needed and keep staff updated on these – for example, in relation to payroll, travel or meetings
- Seek to provide additional flexibility or additional leave to staff where needed, including for those with carer responsibilities
- As far as possible, assist staff to maintain boundaries around work and to sustain other aspects of their lives that promote physical and mental health
- Closely monitor emerging work health and safety requirements, including directives from government, emergency services or health authorities, and ensure staff are informed of these; update workplace procedures as required
- Ensure that risk assessments are undertaken on affected activities such as travel
- Remind staff of supports available to them and their families within the organisation and externally, including Employee Assistance Program or similar arrangements where available

- Ensure that all levels of management are conscious of the need to provide continuing support and supervision to staff in their areas
- Note any staff absences that could relate to their physical or mental health and monitor these throughout the crisis
- Ensure that debriefing, and ongoing psychological support if needed, is provided to all staff affected by critical incidents
- Consider what additional care and support may be required for employees or their families whose health and safety is directly affected by the crisis
- Manage human resources and industrial relations issues as they arise

## 2. How can we maintain communications during crisis?

To manage anxiety, keep people safe and ensure that activity is helpful rather than harmful, it is important that staff and volunteers know what to do – and what not to do. Clear leadership and communication are essential.

External reporting and social media messages during crisis situations can be confusing or misleading, so it is important to source up to date information from reliable sources and communicate this to staff. It is also vital to ensure that management communication and decision-making processes are maintained.

#### During non-crisis periods

- Ensure that a range of communications platforms are accessible and functional (face to face, phone, email, online meetings, online collaboration platforms) so that there are a range of options available should some communication platforms become unavailable
- Develop internal communications protocols to ensure that there is a process for providing

simple clear messages and updates to all staff as information emerges

- Develop strong networks and local coordination mechanisms with partner organisations so that you can work together in integrated ways to respond to crisis

#### During and after crisis

- Stay in regular contact with staff and proactively support your team to stay connected with each other through structured meetings, check-ins, debriefs and one-on-one sessions
- Promptly inform staff of changes to operations, services, working arrangements and other matters
- Frame communications carefully to alert staff to potential issues without increasing anxiety or uncertainty
- Develop an external communications plan to ensure that clients, funders, community members and other stakeholders outside your organisation are aware of the steps you are taking in relation to the situation, and how it may affect them; this can also help to mitigate negative perceptions of your organisation's handling of the crisis.
- Collect feedback from staff and key stakeholders frequently and listen carefully for emerging issues

### 3. How can we build robustness around critical organisational roles?

It is important to identify the critical managers, staff or teams without whom the organisation's core activities cannot function, and to create backup, succession or emergency transition arrangements for these roles where possible.

If the people with access to the organisations bank accounts or IT administration systems were no longer available, what challenges would this create? If executive managers are offline, are

there others with sufficient knowledge and judgment to step up and ensure effective decision making? If team leaders are out of action, will service delivery be able to continue in safe and coordinated ways?

#### During non-crisis periods

- During risk identification, consider not only 'what if we are all affected', but 'what if one or more of these business-critical people are affected and unable to work'?
- Identify agreed back-up staff who have the skills, knowledge and tools to step into these roles if needed.

#### During and after crisis

- Identify how critical staff will be kept safe and active
- Ensure that designated replacement or 'second in command' staff are briefed, understand the context and are prepared to step in if needed

### 4. How can we change work locations if needed during crisis?

A significant crisis may create a situation where specific worksites, or all of an organisation's worksites, are no longer accessible. If normal worksites were no longer available, what would be required in order for staff to quickly transition to working elsewhere? Could this occur seamlessly, or would it require major restructuring of operations and systems?

Where possible, it's worth re-designing organisational processes and systems to eliminate vulnerabilities as part of 'business as usual'. Sometimes this comes at a cost to efficiency, but it means organisations are much more robust when it comes to dealing with unforeseen circumstances.

### During non-crisis periods

- Consider whether staff could readily relocate to an alternate site, work from a temporary office or from home
- Identify the physical infrastructure required to relocate your workforce. Are staff working from laptops and mobile devices, or are they dependent on desktop computers in the office? Are high-speed internet and telecommunications facilities available at alternate work locations? Do staff have access to printing and scanning facilities at alternate work locations if needed? Desks? Vehicles?
- Where possible, identify whether critical business equipment can be made available at multiple sites
- Identify the software and systems infrastructure needed to enable your workforce to work remotely – what software tools and platforms would be required for this to occur? Have these been tested?
- Identify which administrative or service delivery processes are dependent on physical access to current worksites, and consider how these could be adapted if sites were unavailable. If possible, build adaptations into ‘business as usual’ to minimise the changes required to deal with crises
- Identify whether employees have the ability to safely work from home, and remediate any issues in this area prior to crisis

### During and after crisis

- Assess the viability of regular and alternate work locations, and provide clear direction to staff on safe and appropriate work locations
- Implement remote work systems if needed
- Where possible, seek to provide options for work locations that are not home-based, for staff who would be negatively affected by ‘remote only’ work scenarios
- Regularly review these arrangements while in place

## 5. How can we ensure access to critical information during crisis?

The disruption associated with crisis can leave organisations vulnerable to loss or inaccessibility of critical information required to continue operations and provide services. It’s important to ensure that key information is available across multiple work locations, including remotely, and that access is not dependent on specific individuals who may no longer be available.

Organisations who already use robust, distributed and flexible IT systems in normal times will find it easiest to adapt to new circumstances. Resilience may require a degree of redundancy in hardware, software and data management.

### During non-crisis periods

- Identify the areas of critical information without which your organisation could not continue to effectively operate, and consider how access to these could be compromised in the event of crisis
- Consider how information-dependent functions such as payroll, management of finances and recording of client notes can be undertaken if on-site computer systems are no longer available
- For each area of critical information, ensure that backup systems are operating and that there are alternate formats and/or channels through which the information could be accessed if normal channels were no longer available. Test backups and alternate channels to ensure that they are functional
- Where possible, identify alternate software platforms and migration routes which could be implemented in a timely manner if standard platforms become unavailable
- Identify who has critical passwords or credentials to access key information. How would access be safely and appropriately

navigated if the normal “go to” people were not available?

#### During and after crisis

- Monitor IT systems and information availability, and be prepared to switch to alternates if needed
- Continue to monitor information security
- Revisit privacy policies and clarify with staff the protocols for release of personal information where health and safety concerns apply

## 6. How can we manage disruption to our supply chains during crisis?

As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, regional, national and global supply chains can suddenly become unreliable at times of crisis. Service provider organisations working in affected sectors can face significant shortages of key equipment and supplies.

#### During non-crisis periods

- Identify the critical equipment and supplies without which your organisation could not continue to function in a safe and effective manner
- Develop policies on what level of reserves are needed of these items in order to continue operations through a substantial period where new supplies are not available
- Identify how reserve items will be stored, maintained and monitored
- Where possible, identify alternative suppliers of key equipment, with consideration to a diversity of sources from different regions (including locally sourced supplies where feasible)
- Develop collaborative approaches with other organisations and government to maintain appropriate shared access to critical supplies

#### During and after crisis

- Consider how existing equipment could be maintained, repurposed or re-used if fresh supplies are unavailable
- Audit and monitor reserves
- Maintain communication with partner organisations about their needs and reserves, and seek to collaborate so that supplies are available where they are needed most

## 7. How can we best support our clients and communities during crisis?

While organisations will face many internal challenges in dealing with crisis situations, the bigger-picture consideration for service providers will be identifying how best to support clients and communities through difficult times.

Priorities may change rapidly. In the face of crisis, organisations will need to focus on the most pressing issues and highest risk groups within their remit, rather than narrowly attempting to limit themselves to established parameters. This will require a flexible approach from funders and policy makers as well as those delivering services on the ground.

#### During non-crisis periods

- Consider a range of scenarios where service delivery may need to change, for example where face-to-face contact is no longer possible, where clients are no longer located in their normal place, or where community members are experiencing acute health or mental health impacts
- Problem-solve and test a range of strategies for service delivery in these scenarios. Practising these strategies during normal times will mean they are much easier to deploy during crisis



## During and after crisis

- Consider potential impacts of the situation on your community as well as your organisation. How can your organisation best continue to support vulnerable community members?
- Gather information on how the pattern of needs is changing, and who is at greatest risk
- Identify what non-critical activities, services and tasks can be temporarily discontinued, to allow resources to be prioritised to preventing or responding to the crisis
- If staff are working directly with clients and community members, keep them informed of current policy recommendations and preventative strategies to reduce the likelihood of health and safety impacts to staff, clients or community
- Consider how staff or your organisation as a whole could contribute to broader crisis management and recovery processes, and how you may be able to coordinate with others in these efforts

## Build underlying flexibility and resilience

Business continuity planning can be undertaken at different levels of detail. Even a high-level sweep across the above issues can yield a useful set of actions that can increase preparedness.

Detailed business continuity planning requires greater effort, and often results in more far-reaching changes to underlying systems, processes and infrastructure. This investment pays off during periods of disruption when 'business as usual' is no longer an option, by providing a smooth transition to alternate ways of operating that are safe and effective.

The underlying goal is to build organisational flexibility and resilience so that service provision can continue with minimal interruption through periods of change. In addition to its benefits for organisational sustainability, this approach means that service providers can effectively support their clients and community through crisis, and contribute usefully to the long journey of recovery that follows.

## Resources

The first article in Lirata's **business continuity series** provides an overview of business continuity planning, and more useful resources:

→ *Time to update (or create) your business continuity plan*

[www.lirata.com/resources/time-update-or-create-your-business-continuity-plan-59](http://www.lirata.com/resources/time-update-or-create-your-business-continuity-plan-59)

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) **Resilient Community Organisations toolkit** is a great resource for business continuity planning, enabling community organisations to assess their state of preparedness for disasters and emergencies, and providing a six-step framework for building disaster resilience.

→ [resilience.acoss.org.au](http://resilience.acoss.org.au)

## Assistance with business continuity planning

Lirata assists organisations to assess risk, prepare for adverse events and build flexibility and resilience as a foundation for long-term success. For further information or assistance, please contact the Lirata team:

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