The media will be here in 15 minutes – or less

Disaster preparedness and business recovery in cultural institutions

All the speakers at the DISACT disaster preparedness seminar had a theme in common: plan! Some emphasised prior planning, some emphasised testing the plan, but planning (and the associated testing) is clearly the only game in town. It can be played at very high levels, where disaster planning combines with business continuity management (BCM), alternate sites and image management, or it can be as simple as having a tested evacuation plan (and maybe back-up off-site tapes for your computer systems). Following the 11 September 2001 World Trade Centre disaster, it became apparent that of the companies in the building who had corporate art collections, fewer than 50 per cent had off-site copies of their catalogue – so more than 50 per cent have no idea what they lost. Is your catalogue backed up off-site?

The figures for businesses that go under following disasters are dismaying, but unsurprising. To survive a disaster, a business or organisation must have identified its core function and protected the processes and information that make core function possible. What is yours? The maximum acceptable outage of your service should also be identified and factored into plans. (See Sharan Harvey's description of a disaster in Toowong Library in Brisbane on page 11 of this issue.)

The speakers emphasised the cyclical and continuous nature of disaster planning. The figure below is a sample process that might be followed. Several speakers mentioned that their organisation, or those they had advised, had done little about BCM until a small disaster came along as a wake-up call. Testing should be continuous and varied:

run scenarios over a sandwich lunch, hold building evacuations, check escape routes and assembly points – are staff sufficiently aware of them? Test, test test: this is where you find out whether your plan works. Untested plans are more dangerous than no plan at all. Outsourcing is not a way of diminishing risk, it adds your partner's risk to your own, as well as risk associated with extended supply lines. Know the disaster plans of your suppliers.

Business continuity planning, the overarching process within which disaster management sits, has many parts. Some of the topics discussed were

- Incident management (protection of people, evacuation, dealing with emergency services). The first hour after a disaster can be critical. The media are going to turn up. One speaker pointed out that, on average, the media arrives at the site of a disaster within 15 minutes – quite possibly before the fire trucks – hence the title of this piece. Who is responsible for speaking to them? Does everyone else know who that is? Your reputation is on the line here.

- Crisis management (the disaster is declared, the site is under the control of emergency services). You know, don't you, that it is a legal requirement to comply with their orders. And you should know the legal requirements for documenting your actions in a crisis.

- Legal liability: if there is property or personal injury arising from response to a disaster, liability can be *civil* (under common law, such as cases for damages), *industrial* (Workcare can institute proceedings against employers with inadequate OH&S or bad work practices) or *criminal* (police can lay charges) .

There were some simple questions suggested at the seminar, which could kick-start practical consideration of disaster management at a meeting.

- Is there an emergency services liaison person? Emergency services love to have one person to deal with, preferably with a distinctive jacket and authority to make decisions.

- Is there a building services expert? This person should know how the building works: will shutting down the electrical systems make the emergency generator kick in?

- Is there a First Aid person? Equipment? That can be carried off-site to deal with injuries if the building is evacuated?

- Are off-site assembly points arranged, with fall-back positions, for both on-site and incoming staff? Incoming staff may not have access to the area(s) where on-site staff are assembling.

- How can staff be identified? Who is here, who is not, and have emergency services any way to decide if an individual has any right of access to a site?

- Employers and employees should understand of the duty of care they owe one another. 'Duty of care' requires that employers have taken all reasonably practical steps to protect the health and safety of employees, and for employees to ensure that their actions (including omitted actions) do not contribute to risk.

Want to do something about planning before you have a disaster, but don't know where to start? DISACT (Disaster ACT) is a planning body established by cultural and scientific collecting institutions in Canberra. It works to improve disaster preparedness and to provide local mutual assistance in the event of emergencies affecting public collections. DISACT sponsors disaster recovery training, and holds quarterly DISACT Network meetings. It has a website (http://www. anbg.gov.au/disact/) and a mailing list (DISACT-L). There are plans to start similar groups in other states; for more information about this, or DISACT itself, contact the DISACT public officer, Bernard Kertesz, at the Australian War Memorial, e-mail bernard.kertesz@awm.gov.au.

DISACT expects within the next month or so to put up on its website some or all of the papers given at the seminar. The speakers were Les Whittett (disaster planning consultant, Leslie Whittett & Associates), Erica Persak (Assistant director collection services, National Gallery of Australia), Lydia Preiss (Preservation Services, National Library of Australia), Peter Heal (Senior risk manager, ACT Insurance Authority), Matthew Harper (Director emergency management, ACT Emergency Services Authority) and Alison Casey (Team leader OH&S projects, Comcare). ∎