

Evacuation Versus Shelter-In-Place

Since Congress enacted the Emergency Planning & Community Right-To-Know Act (SARA Title III) in 1986, numerous publications and seminars have evolved to help state and local agencies, communities and private facilities prepare for a chemical emergency. Specific written guidelines on how to develop and implement an emergency preparedness plan are available through the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the Emergency Response Institute, Inc. and the National Response Team among others. The National Response Team consists of thirteen Federal departments and agencies, such as the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Department of Justice (DOJ), Coast Guard and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

One area these guidelines have not addressed in detail is the question of when to evacuate a Community in an emergency and when to institute shelter-in-place. The ultimate goal of SARA Title III is to minimize the possibility that a community will be exposed to an accidental release of toxic materials and to ensure that citizens can be protected in case of a release.

To reach this goal effectively, local Community Emergency Planning Committees and Districts must decide who is responsible for notifying, alerting and warning the public, and who is responsible for issuing and implementing evacuation orders.

To decide when to evacuate a community and when to institute shelter-in-place depends on the nature of the released material (e.g. explosive, reactive), the time of the release, the proximity to the release and the pathway of the release (i.e. air, water or land). To evacuate an area properly, the Community Emergency Committee should identify:

- The person responsible for issuing evacuation orders;
- Areas within a facility/community that may require evacuation;
- The person responsible for coordinating with nearby jurisdictions regarding evacuation routes and reception centers;
- Provisions for identifying the number of people requiring transportation and the means to get them to the receiving centers;
- Provisions for identifying central staging areas and pick up points for people requiring transportation;
- Provisions for a telephone information center where evacuees may receive correct evacuation information;
- Provisions regarding employee reentry into the hazard area; and
- Floor plans specifying evacuation routes from building(s).
- Instituting shelter-in-place is much less time consuming. Instituting shelter-in-place consists of:
 - Properly notifying the public of the nature of the emergency;
 - Identifying the reasons for insisting on remaining in place;
 - Identifying precautions to take such as sealing doors and windows and turning off ventilation systems; and
 - Patrolling the area of sheltered persons.

The advantages of instituting shelter-in-place are: It is instantaneous; People are more comfortable in their familiar surroundings; and Necessities (e.g. telephone, radio, television, food, and clothing) are readily accessible. The major disadvantage is that accurate, reliable information is more difficult to receive.

The advantages of evacuating are that persons are away from the exposed area, and if the community moves to mass care shelters, information and medical relief are instantaneous. The disadvantages of evacuation are: Evacuation is time consuming; Evacuees may not be informed of where to go; The contaminant plume may shift into the evacuation route; People are unwilling or unable to leave their residences; Evacuees may move to locations other than mass care shelters making it more difficult to track them; and Evacuees may return to the affected area prior to the danger passing.

In reality, evacuation is usually considered a last resort to protect the community because of the complex nature of completing a successful evacuation. Federal law requires that at least twenty five percent of the affected population have a mass shelter to go to. It is estimated that approximately eighty five percent of evacuated persons decide to go to their relatives and only fifteen percent decide to move to mass care shelters. In any case, individuals should not make the decision on whether to evacuate; they should follow official instruction.

The key issue is that communities should plan ahead by educating the public about evacuation and shelter-in-place. With planning and education, either choice can be implemented effectively during an emergency.