

## **Crisis Communications**

*Take action now to help stay connected during an emergency.*

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**T**he chaos in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina underscored the need for healthcare facilities to have a disaster recovery plan. A critical component of the disaster recovery plan is maintaining communications services during an emergency.

Failure to plan can hamper an organization's ability to connect with patients, extend medical services, retrieve vital records, and keep up with myriad administrative processes. Several steps can be taken now, starting with calling communications vendors or service providers.

### **Voice communication alternatives**

Your local telephone company likely offers one or more of the following affordable options to help ensure voice service continuity.

- Advanced (ultra) call forwarding allows you to reroute incoming calls to a backup location in case of an outage. You can dial in to set it up from anywhere. This service is much better than basic call forward, which must be programmed from the office line itself and thus is not available if you can't get into your building.
- Redirect service is like a forwarding service with extra bells and whistles. It enables you to redirect incoming calls to other locations as well as redirect calls to multiple

locations on the basis of such preferences as where or when the call originates.

- Alternate serving wire center equips your building with a dial tone from two different telephone company exchanges (central offices). If one exchange gets knocked out of service, the other exchange handles the phone calls. Your local carrier can tell you if this option is available at your location.

### **Internet access protection**

Because the Internet is a mission-critical tool for every healthcare provider, it makes sense to protect this resource against any service disruption. One way to do this is to have your router set up to perform load balancing, which allows Internet traffic to be handled by two Internet service providers (ISPs) over two separate paths. If one of the links goes down, the other link takes all of your traffic. No matter how satisfied you are with your current ISP, consider adding a backup ISP as a hedge against disaster.

Protection of your Internet access also has a security aspect. Many service providers offer managed security services that include anti-virus, firewall, anti-spyware and pop-up/ad blockers. Managed security services, in which the service provider takes responsibility for keeping the network secure, are especially helpful for clinics, physician group practices, long-term care facilities and small hospitals that do not have their own network technicians.

### **Safeguarding data networks**

Larger, multilocation healthcare organizations that rely on advanced data networks should investigate the options to ensure that mission-critical processes will continue without interruption during emergency situations.

- A virtual private network (VPN) is a cost-effective way to back up private lines or high-speed data services. If your private line or data service fails, your traffic can be automatically rerouted to a VPN, which securely transports data across the Internet.
- Dual optical fiber rings from the phone company serve many buildings. The rings safeguard data traffic using a built-in protection capability. When data is blocked by a fiber cut or equipment failure, transmission is rerouted in the opposite direction over the other fiber. The handoff

happens so quickly, you will not even be aware that a problem has occurred.

- Dual-entrance facilities, which are found in many buildings that have dual optical fiber rings, have separate entrances for telecommunications lines, allowing access to the equipment room from two directions. This "path diversity" can further protect your location against a total network outage.

### **The bottom line**

These preventive measures are like health insurance: You invest in it hoping it never has to be used. Ultimately, your ability to continue providing patient services during a prolonged emergency rests on taking action now to safeguard your voice services, data network and Internet access.

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