



NO PLAN

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AHEAD

READY OR NOT

CRISIS PLANNING Helps Townships
PREPARE for the Worst,
PERFORM Under Pressure

BY AMY BOBB / ASSISTANT EDITOR

IF THERE'S ONE THING WE HAVE LEARNED during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, it's that things can change in an instant. Bad news can come quickly, and your response determines how resilient you are and how well you will emerge from a crisis. While it may not be possible to predict every scenario that could happen, putting crisis planning practices into motion can help your township confidently tackle almost any trouble that comes its way.

When COVID-19 hit Pennsylvania in March, Dawn Didra was new to her role as the emergency management coordinator in Heidelberg Township, Lehigh County. Already the zoning officer there, she was familiar with township operations but hadn't yet had any training or experience in dealing with emergencies, let alone a pandemic.

"The township had an old emergency operations plan, but it was more focused on natural disasters and didn't have any advice for dealing with a pandemic," she says.

To figure out what she should be doing, Didra reached out to her county emergency management office, took a pandemic planning online course with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and joined PSATS' Township Emergency Management Association. She then set in motion a plan for responding to the crisis. Among her top priorities were developing policies to keep the staff and public safe, obtaining

protective supplies for the township's fire company and ambulance corps, passing a disaster proclamation, and tracking emergency-related expenses to submit to the state for disaster relief funds.

She also wanted to provide reliable information to residents so she added a COVID page to the township's website, which she updates weekly.

One of her more sobering responses occurred when the township learned early on that a resident had died of the virus. Didra released a public statement to express the township's condolences and spell out how the township was responding to the crisis.

"I said that even though we're a rural community and may feel sheltered from the rest of the world, this news brought home the fact that we all need to be prepared and take the necessary precautions to protect one another," she says. "I also wanted to be reassuring that the township is doing everything in its power to protect the public while still performing critical business."

Didra's crash course in emergency and crisis management is an experience that every township, in one form or another, is living now. Perhaps no other time in recent history has everyone across Pennsylvania, the nation, and the world faced the same overwhelming crisis. Since COVID-19 arrived on the scene earlier this year, the deadly virus has wreaked havoc with public health, the economy, and many lives.

Like everyone else, townships have had to rapidly respond to the pandemic, figuring out how to comply with a state-ordered lockdown and health directives

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Tips for surviving any crisis

that promote social distancing to slow down the virus's spread.

"We are going through this at the same time," Mandy Arnold, CEO of Gavin, a York-based branding and communications agency, says. "That in itself is an unusual circumstance, but this crisis provides an opportunity to assess what you are doing and get out in front of it, too."

Even now as the commonwealth begins to reopen, region by region, everyone is trying to figure out what the future holds and how to navigate this new way of life. While it may feel like trial by fire of late, experts agree that now is the time for townships to take stock of what they are learning and use it to become more adept at crisis management in the future.

"Crisis planning doesn't always get the time and attention it deserves, but if ever an event makes townships realize the importance of having a crisis plan, COVID-19 is it," Jason Kirsch, a partner in PRworks in Harrisburg, says. "The past few months have demonstrated that it's not a matter of *if* a crisis will happen but *when*, so it's critical for townships to be as prepared as possible."

Prepare for the unpredictable

Horsham Township in Montgomery County is no stranger to crises. In 2014, it was one of several communities in the southeast forced to deal with the discovery of chemicals from firefighting foam used decades ago on nearby military bases in its drinking water supply.

As the news blew up in the press, the township dropped everything to deal with the crisis. To protect public health, it immediately shut down affected wells and purchased water from neighboring supplies until treatment systems could be installed to clean up the contaminated groundwater. The township also implemented a four-pronged plan, centered on education, communication, remediation, and compensation, with an overall goal to build trust with residents while moving the community past the crisis.

Dennis Haggerty Jr., the township's director of administration, says the entire experience taught Horsham a valuable lesson about responding to a crisis:

A crisis, by definition, is unpredictable. Having a well-thought-out crisis plan is crucial for being prepared, but so is making sure you are flexible and resilient enough to respond to an incident you may have never expected to happen.

Aden Hogan, who helped coordinate Oklahoma City's response to the 1995 federal building bombing that killed 168 people and injured hundreds more, offers these suggestions for successfully managing any kind of crisis, even the unthinkable:

- **Planning, planning, planning** — Critical steps are build, test, modify, and monitor a plan. Fortune favors the prepared, he says.
- **Communication** — Lack of communication is the fatal flaw internally and externally. Have a plan, he says, and a backup.
- **Problem solving** — Fix current problems among your staff. You can't respond effectively if you have issues with daily operations.
- **Checklists** — Develop checklists for critical actions and assign specific people to them.
- **Management** — Learn the incident command system and practice it.
- **Protection and support** — Prioritize protecting your responder and support staff. No one can effectively manage a crisis without appropriate staff to assist.
- **First eight hours** — Plan well for what is the most critical decision-making period.
- **Collaboration** — Develop mutual aid agreements before you need them.
- **On task** — Do the job assigned to you. It takes many support people to keep the responders going. We can't all be rescuers, Hogan says.
- **Focus and attitude** — Focus on positive action and progress and not on the mistakes you will make.
- **Confidence** — When in doubt, do the right thing.

"Emergency preparedness is job number one for the public administrator," Hogan says. "Don't fall into the trap of putting it on the back burner or thinking it will never happen in your community. It can, and it will. Managers must be prepared to respond to it."

This information was adapted from Aden Hogan's article "Managing the Unthinkable" in ICMA's e-book, Building Resilient Communities During Disruptive Change. The book can be accessed for free at icma.org.



CRISIS PLANNING

When bad news hits, it's important to be proactive, get ahead of the issue, and act quickly to reassure a worried and frightened public.

"We now know the worst that can happen," he says. "It is not something you can always plan for, but dealing with the water issue prepared us and made us more comfortable in how we handle a crisis."

So, when COVID-19 reared its ugly head earlier this year, the township decided to go on the offensive. It turned to its crisis plan as a go-to guide for dealing with the pandemic.

"This was something that no one has been through before so we didn't necessarily have specifics to rely on," Haggerty says, "but we knew our number-one goal was to keep everyone safe."

An emergency management team comprised of Haggerty, the township manager, and the emergency management coordinator began holding daily meetings to stay abreast of what was happening in the state, the county, and the community. The team also began meeting weekly with department heads to ensure the lines of communication were open, priorities could be met, and the township could respond quickly to the latest news and guidelines, including



Townships that have thought through a crisis plan in advance are better positioned to weather a crisis.

obtaining protective supplies and making sure employees could work from home.

"No one really knew what would happen with this virus, but we wanted to make the right decisions early and keep everyone safe and protected," Haggerty says. "Rather than wait for the virus to hit us, we decided to be proactive and have our plan in place."

The township initiated extra office cleanings and established a work-from-home rotation to reduce the number of staff at the township building, the public works garage, and the township-run library. It also prioritized getting news out quickly and accurately to the public, adding a COVID-19 page to its website, and sharing vital messages on its social media pages. The webpage is updated daily, and at 4:30 p.m., a text alert is sent to residents with the latest news and a link driving them to the website.

"We want to be sure we are getting accurate information out to the public," Haggerty says. "Because there is so much information coming out from everybody, our goal is to keep it simple,

focusing on the latest numbers and what people need to know at the local level."

A crisis can occur anytime and anywhere. For many communities, it comes in the form of a natural disaster (*a tornado or flood*), a manmade event (*a chemical spill or accident*), or some sort of internal problem (*a cybersecurity threat or the sudden loss of an employee*), but as this pandemic has shown, townships must be ready for anything.

While the context of each individual scenario may be unique, a crisis demands an immediate and well-orchestrated response. A crisis management plan lays out the steps and procedures for tackling a crisis and further reducing harm or risk to the township and the public.

"You never really know what is coming, but there will always be something," Kathy Pape, an attorney with McNees Wallace and Nurick LLC in Harrisburg, says. "Those who are ready — while it doesn't eliminate everything — can make their life a lot easier."

For the unprepared, a crisis can result in serious operational, legal, and reputa-



"Crisis planning doesn't always get the time and attention it deserves, but if ever an event makes townships realize the importance of having a crisis plan, COVID-19 is it."

— Jason Kirsch, PRworks

tional damage. However, by planning in advance, a township can position itself to effectively manage a crisis while still maintaining critical public services.

“Stuff is going to happen, and sitting around thinking that it won’t is not leadership thinking,” Pape says. “Who would have thought that we would be dealing with a pandemic right now? Nobody, yet here we are. At the end of the day, you must be prepared to provide services to your residents no matter what happens.”

Developing a plan

Planning for the expected is what townships do every day, but dealing with the unexpected is what crisis planning is all about. Experts will tell you that the right time to develop a crisis plan is long before you need it.

It starts with strategic conversations focused on what could go wrong in your township and what the game plan is when it does. The process can be as simple as brainstorming with critical people in and outside of your township and establishing a checklist of what to do and who to contact when an event hits. The goal is to have templates in place and resources at the ready.

“As a crisis moves at a rapid pace, you can only be as effective as the information you have at your fingertips,” Arnold of Gavin says.

Townships looking to develop a workable crisis plan can begin with these basic steps:

- **Create a crisis team** — Critical members include the township administrator, the emergency management coordinator, department heads, and elected officials. Think about the scenarios you are planning for and reach out, as necessary, to the police and fire departments, school district, and other strategic partners in the community, county, and state.

Your team members and partners should be providing diverse points of view and ways of thinking, all of which will help to make your plan stronger. Part of the job of the crisis team is to develop crucial relationships and create a comprehensive contact list that you can turn to in an emergency.

“Keep in mind that it’s not always going to be 9 to 5 when things come up,”

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Pape says. She recommends updating the contact list regularly and getting home and cell numbers, if possible, so that you can reach key people even when an emergency occurs in the middle of the night or on a holiday or weekend.

- **Strategize and develop a plan**

— Members of the crisis team should identify risks and vulnerabilities within the township and come up with corresponding strategies and documents to respond to various scenarios. These checklists, templates, and other useful tools will form the basis for your crisis plan. Documents should also include a draft emergency declaration, which can be quickly adopted, if necessary.

“By having these documents prepared in advance, you won’t be starting from nothing when you’re faced with a crisis,” Kirsch of PRworks says.

As part of the plan, lay out the roles and responsibilities of the team members. Identify who will have decision-making authority and put in place the protocols for activating your crisis response steps.

“The time to figure out who is in charge is not when a spill or natural disaster has occurred,” Pape says.



“As a crisis moves at a rapid pace, you can only be as effective as the information you have **at your fingertips.**”

— Mandy Arnold, Gavin

The team should also develop guidelines for communicating, both externally with the public and internally with employees, and decide whose job it is to inform staff, handle press inquiries, and post updates on social media and the website. The crisis plan should also include procedures for operating the township remotely.

“As this pandemic has shown, it’s hard to write off any kind of ‘what if’s,’” Kirsch says. “You never know what is going to happen.”

- **Update, train, and practice** —

Once developed, the plan should not be filed away, only to be accessed when a crisis occurs. Instead, think of the plan as an active, fluid document that is frequently reviewed and kept up to date. You also want to ensure that all

employees are familiar with the plan and trained to know how to respond in an emergency.

“Sometimes, the most unlikely person will be the first to hear about an emergency, and that person needs to know what to do,” Pape says.

Crisis experts recommend holding dry runs or tabletop exercises to test the plan. During such drills, an emergency scenario is laid out for the various players, including township personnel, emergency responders, and public utilities, to practice responding. The exercise enables gaps to be discovered and adjustments to be made before a real emergency ever occurs.

John DeSantis of Rising Sun Consultants LLC in Hershey advises townships to focus on the mission-critical portions

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Crisis Planning Resources

of their plan and spend time practicing what needs to occur in the first 24 hours of a crisis, a time when emotions usually run high.

“A crisis is very emotionally bent by definition,” he says, “yet most people don’t think well when they’re highly emotional.”

Much like a firefighter trains to fight fires, you want your employees to be so well-practiced and comfortable with their role in an emergency that they can respond and think clearly without emotions getting in the way.

The more real you can make your practice runs, the better. For example, working from home is often considered a standard part of a continuity of operations plan, but how many organizations ever bothered to test out the scenario before the recent stay-at-home order forced their hand? As many have learned, things may not go as smoothly as hoped. Were your employees able to access their files from home? Did they have up-to-date equipment to accomplish the tasks? Did they know their usernames and passwords to access remote files?

“COVID taught us a lot about working from home,” Pape says. “This has been a big dry run for everyone.”

Sending a positive message

Severe storms, scandals, and even a worldwide pandemic may put township officials in the glare of the spotlight, and how they communicate during a crisis can make or break a township’s reputation.

“The township’s role in a crisis is to keep everyone calm and not let a situation become elevated to the point where people are frightened,” Penny Pollick, the manager of East Cocalico Township in Lancaster County, says. “You want to be upfront and tell people what you are doing.”

As part of a crisis plan, townships should develop a basic yet flexible strategy for what, when, where, and how they release information to employees, the public, and the press. This plan should include key message templates, such as public statements and press releases, that correspond with the different types of scenarios a township may experience. ➤

Townships looking for help with crisis planning will find the following resources helpful:

- **County Emergency Management Office** — Your county coordinator is a good place to turn when townships have questions about what to do in a crisis or emergency. A list of these people can be found on PEMA’s website at pema.pa.gov/County-EMC.
- **Pa. Emergency Management Agency** — PEMA is a valuable state partner providing response to, preparedness for, recovery from, and the mitigation or prevention of disasters and other emergencies. In addition to helping certify local coordinators, the agency offers training, grants, and other resources to help communities with crises. Learn more at www.pema.pa.gov.
- **Federal Emergency Management Agency** — FEMA offers guidance, funding, training, and other assistance to help the nation prepare and recover from disasters and emergencies. You can access information about Region 3, which Pennsylvania belongs to, at fema.gov/region-iii-dc-de-md-pa-va-wv. The agency also has preparedness toolkits for winter weather safety, flood safety, severe weather safety, hurricane season, extreme heat, and other topics. The kits are available at www.ready.gov/calendar.
- **Township Emergency Management Association** — PSATS’ affiliate organization provides training, resources, and networking for township emergency management coordinators, public safety personnel, road and public works employees, and anyone else who performs emergency management duties. Find out more at tema.psats.org.
- **PSATS Training** — The State Association offers a variety of training focused on crisis management. In light of COVID-19, PSATS has increased its webinar and virtual classroom offerings. Recent topics include “Developing and Nurturing Your Township’s Organizational Resiliency” by Jim Rowell of Rising Sun Consultants and “Media Training 101” by Mandy Albert of Gavin. Jason Kirsch of PRworks will present a one-hour webinar “Don’t Wait: How to Prepare Now for the Next Crisis” on August 5 at noon. In addition, PSATS is offering the following virtual conference workshops on crisis-related topics:
 - How to Build — and Rebuild — Public Trust in Government: June 17, 6:30-7:45 p.m.
 - Crisis Management: Communicating in the (New) Real World: July 2, 9-10:15 a.m.
 - Five Cardiac Township Events and the CPR to Address Them: July 8, 6:30-7:45 p.m.Go to learn.psats.org to search current and archived training options.

“Just as the pandemic has called upon each of us to adapt in this moment, it is incumbent on us to start looking ahead to be ready for the post-pandemic future.”



CRISIS PLANNING

Your message should be brief, accurate, and easily absorbed, DeSantis says, and even when the news is bad, try to keep a positive, optimistic tone to your words.

“What your residents ultimately want to hear is that you are doing all you can and we are all in this together,” he says.

In today’s world where people have

instant access to news, townships should prioritize getting their message out as soon as possible before others step in to fill the void. Social media and the website are critical tools for accomplishing this.

“We always advise people to use their own platform first in close collaboration with the media,” Arnold of Gavin says. “While a reporter or newscaster can help you distribute news, you want to send people to your social media and website for correct and detailed information.”

She suggests developing a “dark page” on the website, where townships can

provide critical details that residents should know in an emergency. This page can be switched on during a crisis and tweaked as necessary to get important information out to the public. Townships should also set up a short message service (SMS) or text-messaging system so that residents can receive important alerts on their phones. Every message should drive the receiver back to the township’s website for more details.

A crisis moves at a rapid pace, and townships can only be as effective in communicating as the information they have. Arnold recommends coordinating with your state and local partners to

THE 4 A’s OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

How to respond to a crisis and become better problem solvers in the process

Crisis management experts stress the importance of a proactive risk management plan. The goal of this plan is to minimize frequency (*how often a crisis occurs*), reduce longevity (*how long a crisis lasts*), and decrease intensity (*how intense the crisis feels*).

To help organizations reach that goal, Rising Sun Consultants map out their “Four A’s” approach to crisis management:

1) Assessment — During this pre-crisis phase, you think about how to prevent, plan, and prepare for a crisis. You develop a plan to address various scenarios and practice it to make sure it works. Bring your employees on board by asking questions, seeking feedback, and testing their response. Continually assess and adjust to make your plan better.

“You want to identify potential weaknesses and vulnerabilities before a crisis hits,” John DeSantis of Rising Sun Consultants says. “By seeking input from people ahead of time, you are also making your team feel more comfortable and confident to address the crisis.”

2) Aggressive action — When a crisis hits, you respond aggressively. You put your plan into action to extinguish the fire and bring things back to normal as quickly as possible. Because of this aggressive approach, your residents feel confident that the township is doing all in its power to move beyond the crisis.

“You want to send a reassuring and comforting message to your residents that you have the crisis under control and are implementing a plan to restore order,” DeSantis says.

3) Assurance — In this phase, you reflect and look back at how well your actions reduced the frequency, longevity, and intensity of the crisis. Were there weaknesses and vulnerabilities that you missed during the assessment phase? Identify what the problems are and start to explore

solutions. Encourage creativity and seek out new perspectives.

“Now that the crisis is over, where should we focus our energies so we are better equipped the next time it happens?” DeSantis says. “Who do we have to talk to to come up with solutions that will make us stronger?”

4) Adapting — Now, you start to implement solutions and develop your “new normal.” What does your township look like now that you have learned from your mistakes and put new processes and strategies in place?

“You want to emerge even stronger than before,” he says.

This cyclical approach to crisis management returns you once again to the first phase, where you will assess what new vulnerabilities have materialized with these new processes. By going through the cycle, DeSantis says, your organization and employees will become better at problem solving, idea generation, and collaboration.

“In a perfect world, you should see the impact of phase two becoming less,” he says.



make sure accurate and timely news is flowing appropriately. It's also important to understand the township's role in the crisis and be careful not to overstep it.

"You don't want to be something you're not," she says.

During this pandemic, for example, hospitals and health officials should be providing health and medical updates, while townships should position themselves as the go-to resource for information about local services.

"In a crisis like we are experiencing now, residents are going to have questions like can I pay my tax bill late or what should I do about my recyclables and trash," Arnold says.

When developing and implementing a communication strategy, strive to be honest and transparent. You want to position yourself as a reliable, trustworthy source of accurate and timely information.

"If you don't have the trust of your public, then you have a real problem because people are going to fill in the gaps and go somewhere else for the information you should be providing," Arnold says. "A crisis is the perfect time for municipalities to establish greater trust, both with the public and their community partners."

Learning from experience

The health and economic effects of the deadly coronavirus continue to reverberate across the commonwealth. With so much uncertainty surrounding this global pandemic, it feels almost inevitable that additional crises could be looming on the horizon. Townships should take the time now, while the initial shock of the pandemic is winding down, to evaluate what just happened and how to better plan for tomorrow.

"We have never seen anything like this before," Arnold says. "Townships should seize on this opportunity to make a list of what they have done exceptionally well, what they can improve upon, and what the gaps are. Then, come up with a plan for managing things better in the future."

Crisis management experts refer to this analysis as the post-crisis, the after-action report, or the post-mortem. (See the article at left for more information about the crisis management cycle.) The



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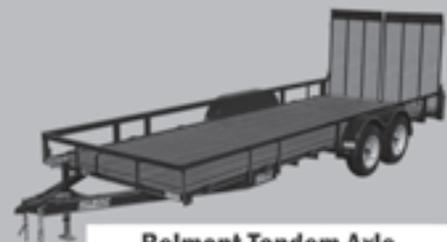
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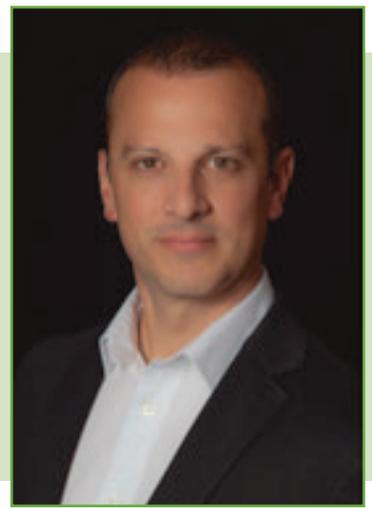
CRISIS PLANNING

goal is to get key players together after a crisis has died down to debrief and figure out what went right and what went wrong. If a day-to-day record wasn't kept, use this time, while the event is still fresh in your mind, to retrace your steps, piece together the actions you took, and reflect on what you would do differently the next time. This historical document becomes a valuable resource for future planning.

Even if your township had a crisis plan crafted in advance, it's not unusual to find out in the heat of the moment that what looked good on paper was not easily implemented after all.

“What your residents ultimately want to hear is that **you are doing all you can and we are all in this together.**”

— John DeSantis,
Rising Sun Consultants



“Go back and look at the crisis management tools you had in place,” DeSantis says. “Were you prepared or were you lacking? Use the time after a crisis to take stock of your current processes and see if you can make them more robust.”

East Cocalico Township Manager Penny Pollick is pleased overall with her

township's response to the pandemic and state shutdown. Although COVID-19 hit Lancaster County relatively hard — it consistently ranks among the top 10 counties with the highest number of cases statewide — the township managed to perform vital duties with its doors closed to the public by adjusting operations to comply with social distancing requirements.

Like other municipalities, it had to figure out such new logistics as how to conduct public meetings virtually and allow employees to work from home. Pollick also conducts daily check-ins with the police, ambulance, and fire departments to stay apprised of news and receive updates on the status of protective equipment and supplies, the number of COVID patients that were transported to the hospital, and any preemptive quarantining of first responders who may have been exposed to the virus.

“Communication is the key to pulling everyone together,” she says. “Things have been going smoothly, and our staff, first responders, and police are handling it all wonderfully.”

Even so, when things calm down, she plans to confer with these key players to evaluate the township's performance during the crisis and determine what could have been improved.

“It's important to constantly reexamine how you can do better,” Pollick says. “My goal as manager is always to tweak things until they run like clockwork. Doing this saves time, effort, and taxpayer money.”

Creating resilient people

In the midst of responding to the pandemic these past few months, Pollick also found herself dealing with another

HONORING YOUR HEROES

PSATS' 2021 calendar to focus on everyday heroes

During times of crisis, many people — from employees, residents, and volunteers to local leaders, medical workers, and emergency responders — rise to the occasion and help to make a difference in their communities. As part of your township's crisis management plan, make sure you take time to give thanks to those who helped navigate the crisis successfully.

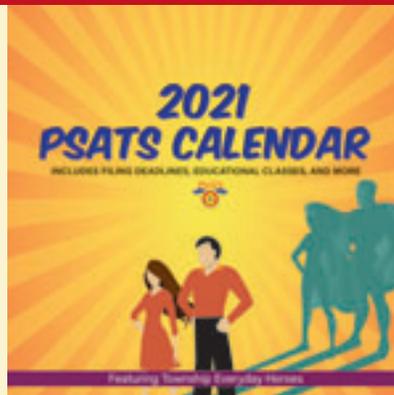
“Don't let the moment pass without conveying appreciation for their contributions,” Jason Kirsch of PRworks says. “There is often a wide range of heroes to celebrate in any crisis.”

PSATS, too, wants to honor the “everyday heroes” in your township by featuring their photos on its 2021 calendar. However, we need your help to do this.

Do you know a township official, employee, or volunteer who has gone above and beyond to help others during the COVID-19 pandemic or for other reasons and causes? Why not recognize them by showing them “in action” on the annual PSATS calendar?

Email photos of your everyday heroes as jpeg attachments to Kaylin Acri at kacri@psats.org by **August 21**. Provide your name, position, township, county, and daytime telephone number. Identify everyone in the photo left to right, their titles or roles, and a brief description of what they're doing in the photo.

To reproduce well in print, photos must have a resolution of at least 300 dpi at a size of 4 by 6 inches. Photos taken with a smartphone are fine, but be sure to send them as “actual size” to ensure full resolution. Photos should be in color.



Send photos of your hometown heroes to PSATS by August 21.

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kind of crisis altogether. In March, just as the township was gearing up for COVID-19, two employees passed away within the span of a week: the first, a rookie police officer in an off-duty motorcycle accident, and the second, the township's long-time finance director, who succumbed to complications from chemotherapy.

"These events threw us into a bit of a crisis mode and reinforced the importance of being prepared and knowing what's what," she says. "If you lose a key person, are you going to be OK if that person never sets foot in your door again?"

Pollick, who only joined the township last July, quickly recognized that she had not yet learned certain important details about the finance director's job, including how to access critical account numbers, passwords, and usernames.

"The director held things pretty close, and I had not been here long enough to delve into certain specifics yet," she says, "but I was fortunate to have a finance background and the experience to know what needed to be done. I just had to put the pieces of the puzzle together."

This experience only reinforced the importance of planning for a crisis, she says. To prepare for the loss of an employee, she recommends that every township have an up-to-date contact



"There is no perfect plan when it comes to crisis management. Instead, you need people who are flexible and can adjust to it."

— Jim Rowell, Rising Sun Consultants



list, including details about key people and accounts, and a thorough transition plan, which includes cross-training employees on vital operations, establishing standard operating procedures and job descriptions, and building relationships with outside experts who can help out in a jam if necessary.

"It's the manager's or administrator's job to gather and store this information, and it's the responsibility of the supervisors to make sure that it's in place," Pollick says. "If someone dropped off the face of the earth, would your township still run smoothly and efficiently?"

The thing about a crisis, after all, is you never really know when one is going to hit. Some, like a pandemic, can be very public and externally focused, while others, such as the death of a key employee, may be more internal but just as harmful to your operations and reputation.

A crisis plan provides the critical framework for how to respond to a crisis, but in the end, it's the people who determine whether the plan succeeds or fails. Jim Rowell, CEO of Rising Sun

Consultants LLC, believes the reason some organizations fall short in their crisis management efforts is because they have failed to promote resiliency among the employees who carry out the crisis response strategy.

"There is no perfect plan when it comes to crisis management," he says. "Instead, you need people who are flexible and can adjust to it. They should be able to stick to their parts, and when there's a bump or hiccup, they can make necessary adjustments on the fly."

While certain people are natural-born leaders, he says, anyone can learn, through training and experience, to become more resilient and leader-like.

"These skills can be learned if your organization has promoted a culture of resiliency all along," he says. "Are you training and raising up people to be resilient? Are they flexible? Can they adapt to change?"

One of the best ways for measuring resiliency is to evaluate how stable your township is during normal times and how well your employees adapt to day-

"You never really know what is coming, but there will always be something. Those who are ready — while it doesn't eliminate everything — can make their life a lot easier."

— Kathy Pape, McNees Wallace and Nurick LLC

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CRISIS PLANNING

“COVID taught us a lot about working from home. This has been a big dry run for everyone.”

to-day disruptions. The most successful organizations encourage employees to think critically for themselves and be problem solvers.

“During a crisis, you don’t want to have a bunch of doers waiting to be told what to do,” Rowell says.

By practicing and encouraging resiliency in your daily operations, your township and its employees will feel more confident and prepared to tackle whatever crisis come its way.

An uncertain future

The COVID-19 crisis of the past few months has challenged everyone in ways they are just beginning to comprehend. How this global pandemic will continue to affect people socially, medically, and economically remains to be seen.

“Just as the pandemic has called upon each of us to adapt in this moment, it is incumbent on us to start looking ahead to be ready for the post-pandemic future,” Kirsch of PRworks says.

What that future looks like is anyone’s guess. As the science and medical communities work round-the-clock to find viable treatments and vaccines, experts say to expect the deadly virus to be a disruptive force for months, if not years, to come.

In the meantime, steep financial losses due to stay-at-home orders, business closures, and high unemployment are choking off streams of revenue from tax income to liquid fuels funds, and townships are bracing for the economic fallout. According to the state Department of Community and Economic Development, townships could experi-

ence an 11% reduction in total revenue this year. (See the article at right for more about the economic fallout.)

During this time of uncertainty, scarcity of money, and fears about the future, crisis management has never been more important. Planning, transparency, and resiliency are among the proven keys to weathering a crisis, and if there’s one takeaway to be learned from the past few months, it is to prepare now for the next calamity, whatever and whenever that occurs.

“Don’t let this opportunity pass you by in terms of what you can learn from it because this will happen again,” Anold of Gavin says. “It may not be at this level, but now is your chance to get better at crisis planning and communication so you’re more prepared for the next time.” ♦





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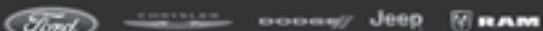


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