

Health Information Compliance Alert

Disaster Preparation: Don't Let Disasters Sink Your Data-Driven Operations

2 broad-stroke efforts protect your electronic and paper medical records.

As nursing home providers in Middle Tennessee learned last spring, a severe flood can occur far from the beaten path for hurricanes. To prepare for storm-related and other disasters, you have to think through how to avoid the unthinkable: Losing the facility's patient-care records, Minimum Data Sets, and billing information.

Bottom line: You need plans "to recover from a variety of different disasters and levels of disasters, ranging from a [computer] hardware failure to a building destroyed by fire, flood, etc.," stresses **Jim Sheldon-Dean**, principal and director of compliance services for Lewis Creek Systems LLC in Charlotte, Vt.

Implement Computerized Backup Systems Without Gaps

Many nursing facilities either don't back up their computerized data at all or "not nearly often enough," says **Pam Campbell, RN, C**, with LTC Solutions in Camdenton, Mo. And they don't check to see if they have a viable backup. "A lot of times, facilities will back up corrupted data over their last good backup," Campbell says. To play it safe, the facility should have multiple backup data sets, she urges.

Key: "The primary idea behind effective backup is to keep the data offsite," says **Nathan Lake, RN, RN, BSN, MSHA**, in Seattle, Wash. Some companies will pick up the facility's backup tapes, he says. "Or you can store the data electronically offsite, as long as the data are encrypted and the company storing it meets healthcare storage requirements," he adds.

"If you can't store it offsite, put it in a fireproof, water proof case. And store it in another part of the building."

You also need "good documentation of your systems and processes so you know what to recreate if they get destroyed," advises Sheldon-Dean.

Take the next step: Some facilities are removing old computerized data and storing it in an archive, notes Lake. This approach also speeds up your computer system.

Protect Your Paper Records From Fire and Water Damage

Many facilities store paper records in their basements or on the lower levels, which can be a major mistake when floodwaters begin to enter a building.

Instead: Secure the paper records on a higher floor in an area protected by fire protection systems designed for paper records, advises Sheldon-Dean. As an extra precaution, consider having a service come in to scan and digitize your paper records, which can be a cost-effective way to protect the information, he adds. Then secure the digitized records offsite or in a fire and waterproof container.

Real-world tip: Taking paper medical records with you during an evacuation can also protect them from damage -- and give you the information required to provide resident care. That's the strategy that The Palace Care and Rehab used during flash flooding, reports the Red Boiling Springs facility's administrator, **Rita Crabtree**.

The Palace staff took the medical records on wheels along with the residents to the National Guard armory, where staff cared for the residents until the floodwaters subsided. Staff sent copies of medical records along with higher-acuity

residents taken by ambulance to receive care at area hospitals during the evacuation period.