

When disaster strikes: Keeping patients informed and your schedule intact

By nature, disasters are largely unpredictable. While severe weather is one of the most common disruptions to healthcare operations, other emergencies such as power outages or building fires can wreak havoc on your organization as well.



Are you ready? See our best practices for disaster preparedness below and learn how **HealthLinc Community Health Center's Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, Melissa Mitchell**, makes sure her organization is prepared for worst-case scenarios.

Disasters carry high costs for your organization—and your community

Unexpected office closures, unavailable staff and facility damages can have significant impacts on operations and your organization's bottom line:

\$152.6 billion

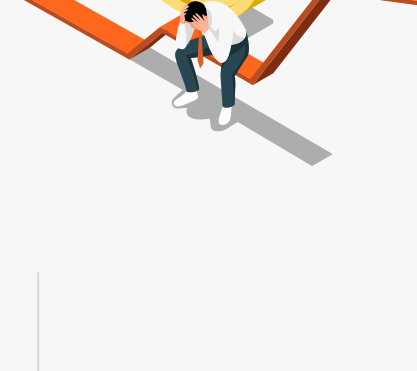
Total cost of natural disasters in the U.S. in 2021ⁱ

Over \$10 billion

Total healthcare-related costs from 10 U.S. climate events in 2012, including hospital admissions, emergency department visits, other medical costs and lost wagesⁱⁱ

\$57,000

Estimated annual cost of power outages for a single healthcare facility in North Americaⁱⁱⁱ



How to make sure your organization is prepared for any scenario

1 Develop plans for the most likely disasters



- Start by identifying the disaster scenarios most likely to impact your geographic area. For HealthLinc, that meant severe snowstorms and tornadoes, as well as non-weather-related power outages.
- Different types of disasters may affect your practice differently for unknown lengths of time, so it's important to make sure you plan for a range of scenarios. For instance, a forecasted winter storm would require a completely different response than a building fire.
- Think through how your staff should communicate with each other within each scenario, how your facility might be affected and what different types of disasters could mean for patient care.

"We put a lot of effort into planning for these scenarios because our mindset is not 'if' but 'when' are we going to run into a disaster."

- Melissa Mitchell, Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, HealthLinc Community Health Center

2 Create contingency plans so your disaster response doesn't depend on any one staff member

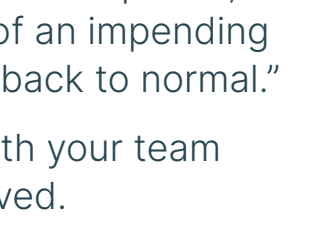


- Ensure that you'll have uninterrupted access to your practice's communication and scheduling tools, even if you can't get to your office, by using a web-based platform.
- Make sure that multiple staff members can access the organization's platform, in case a frontline staff member is unable to come to work or is without power.
- Cross-train and brief your staff on all disaster procedures—everyone needs to be able to pitch in on any necessary task, regardless of their position.

"We need to make sure that every level of employee knows the right thing to do, so that if any level of management is impacted by the disaster, everyone knows what to do next."

- Melissa Mitchell, Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, HealthLinc Community Health Center

3 Rehearse your disaster plans and revise them as needed



- Conduct tabletop exercises simulating an entire disaster response, from the moment your organization becomes aware of an impending emergency to its final resolution when your office is "back to normal."
- Take time after each disaster simulation to debrief with your team and discuss what steps or responses could be improved.
- Keep your disaster plans up to date as employees, processes and facilities change.

These resources can help you plan and practice for disasters:



Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) Emergency Planning Checklist

[READ NOW](#)



Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) Emergency Preparedness Requirements

[READ NOW](#)



Morehouse School of Medicine Emergency Preparedness Toolkit for Primary Care Providers

[READ NOW](#)

"Plan for the absolute-worst disaster. Make sure everyone knows what that plan is. And test it."

- Melissa Mitchell, Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, HealthLinc Community Health Center

4 Keep patients informed in real time



- Create text and email messaging templates for potential emergencies, so you can quickly communicate with your patients.
- Start all messages with the "what" of a disaster or other emergency situation. Tell patients what's going on, and let them know if there's anything they need to do, both immediately and in the aftermath of the crisis.
- Text messages are an efficient way to quickly notify patients about impending emergencies and natural disasters. Staff can follow up via email to share further instructions or updates.
- Be concise and clear—and always proofread your messages.

"In a time of disaster, people need information. The worst-case scenario is that we've given them zero information, and everyone is trying to call at the same time to find out what they need to do. That's bad for our patients and staff and creates dissatisfaction. So, we try to be proactive."

- Melissa Mitchell, Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, HealthLinc Community Health Center

5 When you're ready, get your patients back on the schedule



- Don't rush—get your office in order and check in with your clinicians and staff to make sure they're ready to welcome patients back.
- Digital tools can help your staff prioritize and automate follow-up communications with those patients who most urgently need an appointment.
- Self-scheduling tools can help patients reschedule their cancelled appointments without burdening staff members who may still be recovering themselves.

"Getting everyone back on the schedule can be chaotic. Telemedicine has helped us to improve our accessibility for our patients so that they can still be taken care of, regardless of what's happening with the weather."

- Melissa Mitchell, Chief Innovation and Strategy Officer, HealthLinc Community Health Center

Give your staff the support and tools they need

With many healthcare employees already feeling overextended, the increased workload and disruption created by a disaster can exacerbate their stress and contribute to burnout.

Automating key workflows that are commonly used to prepare for and respond to disasters—like communications and scheduling—can help reduce that extra burden on staff, while helping your team work smarter.



Phreesia's suite of robust applications for intake, access, payments and more can help your organization stay organized and keep patients informed when disaster strikes.

[LEARN HOW](#)

i. NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) U.S. billion-dollar weather and climate disasters (2022). <https://www.noaa.gov/access/billions/>. DOI:10.25921/stkw-7w73

ii. Limaye VS, Max W, Constible J, Knowlton K. Estimating the health-related costs of 10 climate-sensitive U.S. events during 2012. Geo Health. 2019;3(9):245-265. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019GH000202>

iii. "E Source market research reveals that power outages cost businesses over \$27 billion annually, winter storm Jonas makes it worse," E Source, Jan. 27, 2016.