



Best Practices for Managing Critical Winter Weather Events

A guide to responding to winter disasters
and incidents for emergency managers and
corporate security teams

Just when much of the country celebrates the end of hurricane season, winter arrives. Blizzards, ice storms and bitter cold turn commuter and school bus routes into hazards. Highways, railways and airports shut down, disrupting travel and the delivery of goods and services.

Extreme winter weather puts every organization to the test, from state and local agencies that must protect their residents to federal agencies and businesses that need to keep employees safe and operations moving.

Winter Raises the Stakes for State and Local Agencies

In the face of winter's perils, emergency management teams bear the responsibilities of ensuring public safety, including:

- Warning populations of impending storms and their dangers
- Updating the community on developments like road and school closures
- Helping essential hospitals and other critical services stay up and running
- Responding to emergencies like car accidents and people trapped in vehicles
- Coordinating emergency supplies and ensuring delivery
- Tracking the movements of emergency personnel in the field

When the storm blows over, agencies need to shift gears quickly to help communities return to normal as soon as possible.



Winter Presents Challenges for Federal Agencies

Federal agencies employ thousands of people throughout the country and, in some cases, abroad. The list of challenges they face in keeping the workforce safe during winter include:



Monitoring national and global weather disturbances



Reaching employees in real time to warn of impending storms



Delivering accurate, timely instructions on finding shelter or evacuating



Alerting traveling employees of canceled flights and other disruptions

Winter Tests the Mettle of Businesses

Like the federal government, large businesses have employees across the country and the globe and face similar challenges in safeguarding them. They also have to respond to operational threats, such as:


- Plant closures due to roof collapses, power outages and failed heating systems
- Supply chain disruptions caused by weather that paralyzes suppliers
- Struggles with affected freight and shipping carriers
- Absenteeism due to dangerous travel conditions

If not remediated properly, these issues can damage a company's reputation, erode customer trust, diminish productivity and hurt revenue.

The Key to Responding Effectively

Winter storms are becoming more frequent and less predictable. To respond effectively to winter weather calamities, you need a robust emergency planning process reinforced by critical event management (CEM) principles.

In the following sections, we look at each phase of an emergency — before, during and after — and outline best practices for state, local and federal agencies and businesses.

A yellow snowplow is shown clearing a road in a snowy forest. The snowplow is moving from right to left, pushing a large pile of snow and slush. The background is a dense forest of trees covered in snow, with a soft, hazy light filtering through the branches. The overall scene is a winter landscape with a focus on snow removal.

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Before a Winter Weather Event: Build the Plan

Before winter arrives, identify weather threats and assess their risks to your community or business. Thorough planning requires modeling as many scenarios as possible, as well as prioritizing those that are most likely to occur and inflict the most harm.

Next, test and validate the plan's efficacy. Testing can involve drills or computer simulations. Whichever methods you use, note each process gap, articulate its resolution and add it to your plan. Working through this process is the beginning of moving from reacting to winter weather disasters to proactively managing them.

Crisis Communications: The Cornerstone of Every Response Plan

Every agency and organization must communicate quickly with residents or employees to warn them before a critical winter weather event strikes. To ensure you reach the most people:

- **Script messages in advance.** Using templates, create critical messages ahead of time and enable targeting of groups by loading the alerts into a matrix, ideally in a critical communications system. Ensure the system can send messages across multiple channels, increasing their likelihood of delivery.

- **Gather complete contact information.**

Encourage people to provide you with thorough, up-to-date contact information. Set up an online portal to make registration fast and simple. Collecting contact information ensures no one gets left behind in an emergency.

- **Test technology.** Review your messaging platforms and record rates of delivery, clicks, opens, reads, listens and responses. Then do a trial run of your IT and network infrastructure to ensure disaster resilience and proper data back-up.

Best “Before” Practices for State and Local Agencies

In addition to the above practices, state and local agencies should take these two key steps to improve their crisis communications:

Persuade residents to opt in to alerts. By promoting the benefits of registering for emergency alerts, agencies can warn the greatest percentage of the population. A critical communications system is invaluable because it enables group targeting and automated message delivery.

Establish communications with all stakeholders.

Collect and verify contact information for community partners, including government agencies at multiple levels, utilities, local businesses and NGOs like the Red Cross.

Best “Before” Practices for Federal Agencies and Businesses

Larger organizations will be well-positioned to protect employees from harm by incorporating the following best practices into their planning:

Conduct live drills: Simulate winter emergencies to test how well your crisis communications and incident management plans are likely to perform and update your plans accordingly.

Collect location information: To safeguard employees, you must know where they are. Get a complete picture of their likely movements to reach them wherever they live, work or regularly travel.

Create a supply chain blueprint: Businesses should review their supply chains and develop a digital blueprint, including all facilities, suppliers and vendors, customers and clients and their locations, transportation modes and delivery routes.

During a Winter Weather Event: Respond with Intelligence

Finally, the first snowstorm arrives. Now it's time to tap your thorough preparation and put your plan to work. But as the storm unfolds, every organization will face challenges that even the most carefully crafted plan couldn't have anticipated.

The most effective responses are informed by an essential CEM capability: risk intelligence. A risk intelligence product monitors data in real time to create a complete picture of a disaster or incident. When automated by a CEM platform, risk intelligence reporting can filter out the most relevant data and turn it into actionable intelligence. Emergency managers and security analysts can use this actionable intelligence to make decisions and adapt response plans to guide field personnel in managing an incident.

Armed with details of conditions on the ground, agencies and organizations can also quickly alert anyone in potential danger through multiple channels, including smartphones, the internet, email and radios. During an emergency, pre-scripted messages loaded into a critical communications system.

Best “During” Practices for State and Local Agencies

Emergency teams must communicate with residents to keep them calm and safe. They need to let the public know about road and school closures, icy road conditions and power outages and update people on which essential businesses are open.

If you've built a communications matrix of community partners, you can connect quickly with hospitals, utilities, essential businesses and local media.

Best “During” Practices for Federal Agencies

Larger organizations are responsible for alerting a vast, dispersed workforce. With a sound crisis communications plan and actionable intelligence you can:

Target alerts precisely. Using pre-scripted messages and your communications matrix, you can target groups of employees with alerts. For example, you can send a message about a power outage to employees at an affected campus, give them instructions and let them know when power will be restored.

Warn travelers. Targeting critical messages to business travelers is especially effective when you use a modern CEM platform and employees carry GPS-enabled devices. In real time, CEM platforms can track people's movements and collect the details about incidents. When you overlay this information with geolocation data, you can warn employees to avoid locations in the storm's path.

Best “During” Practices for Businesses

Organizations may struggle to sustain operations throughout a storm. A business that’s prepared can overlay its supply chain digital blueprint with real-time intelligence to pinpoint broken supply chain links and manage resolution by:

- Immediately alerting employees and suppliers to disruptions
- Contracting with alternate suppliers
- Boosting production at unaffected facilities when a storm shuts down a plant
- Shifting delivery to carriers less affected by the storm

After a Critical Winter Weather Event: Ensure a Smooth Recovery

When the storm is over, dangers like downed power lines may persist. To mitigate the dangers, you’ll have to continue targeting alerts to people at risk, as well as personnel involved in the recovery.

As you get back on your feet, revisit your emergency response plan, document its performance, scrutinize any shortcomings and update your plans. This process provides a feedback loop that helps improve readiness and execution.

Best “After” Practices for State and Local Agencies

Residents depend on information from emergency managers to return safely to their everyday lives after a storm. That means providing news on when roads, schools, businesses and government offices reopen and when essential services like power and public transportation are restored.

It also means taking the time to review your crisis communications plans. Ideally your CEM platform collects data on how many people consumed your messages.



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Review the data and interrogate your plan: Did you reach the vulnerable? Were you constantly in touch with road crews? How did you communicate with shelters, utilities, hospitals and the business community?

And, of course, incorporate everything you've learned into your emergency response plan.

Best “After” Practices for Federal Agencies and Businesses

In the immediate aftermath of a storm, larger organizations need to update everyone on when they can safely return to the office, campus or production facility. Let travelers or field personnel know when it's safe to visit a location hit by a storm and ask everyone to check in, especially after a disastrous event.

Following recovery, update your response plan, and you'll be ready for whatever winter holds in store next year.

Winter Weather Response Mechanisms Are Improving

The frequency, intensity and unpredictability of winter weather patterns are trending upward, but the intelligence and products available today enable organizations to be more proactive. Pairing best practices with a modern CEM platform helps organizations respond more effectively to weather catastrophes. With improved planning and the ability to pivot quickly when faced with any incident, today's security teams have everything at their disposal to create the best outcomes for people and business operations.

The OnSolve Platform for Critical Event Management™:

OnSolve offers an AI-powered foundation for addressing threats before, during and after winter storms or any other critical event. The platform augments the expertise of emergency managers and risk analysts by providing:



Risk intelligence. Data is automatically collected from a global network of validated sources and dynamic mapping technology monitors facilities, destinations, logistics and the movements of people in real time. Risk intelligence reporting transforms this information into actionable intelligence for rapid decision-making.



Critical communications. With capabilities like geolocation, polling and response tracking, analytics and advanced security, agencies and organizations can communicate with residents or employees anywhere and use risk intelligence to create and target critical alerts.



Incident management. Mobile technology enables response teams to resolve disruptions and adapt response plans on the fly.



Visit the [winter weather resource center](#) for more information on responding to critical events caused by winter weather.

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About OnSolve

OnSolve delivers critical event management solutions designed to help enterprises, organizations and agencies of all sizes create the most successful outcomes when critical events occur. The OnSolve Platform for Critical Event Management combines leading risk intelligence, critical communications and incident management into one SaaS-based global portfolio. Our AI-powered platform is purpose-built to deliver fast, relevant and actionable intelligence, enable vital communications and allow response teams to react calmly and confidently.

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