

Evacuation: Pre-planning is Essential



1. Get out early. Don't delay.
2. Pre-plan your evacuation. Do it now, before it's too late.

Routing, navigation, timing of departure, and predetermined locations to meet-up with family and/or friends, are all critically important elements of every personal emergency plan.

Unfortunately, evacuation routes are often thought to be obvious, and yet the obvious routes are usually a poor choice when disaster strikes.

In large urban areas, as well as rural locations where major storms are a part of life, evacuation routes have often been established, and these are generally marked with special signage. Maps of these 'official' evacuation routes are typically available online at the website for your local government's Emergency Management Planning office.



Notwithstanding, it may be more prudent to review these 'official' routes and then formulate your own evacuation route. Actually, you need several routes. Routes to the rendezvous location where you intend to meet your family or friends, and a route from that location to a more distant safe haven. Plus, direct routes and 'Plan-B' routes to use when your first-choice route is compromised.

In a danger-is-imminent situation you need to skip the rendezvous location and immediately flee to a nearby safe (or safer) location. Then, once the initial danger is past, the maps and other items in your GO-Bag will make it possible for you to escape to a place where you can reconnect with family and friends.

Flexibility is essential, so an understanding of evacuation route options, and a good map, are important components of your GO-Bag.

'GO-Bag' is an acronym for a "Get Out" bag of essential items. This emergency supplies kit is sometimes also referred to as a 'GOOD Bag' (Get-Out-of-Dodge Bag), or 'Bug-Out Bag' (old military term).

Whichever term you use, this is a knapsack containing 12-20 pounds of essential items, things that you may desperately need for safe evacuation.



You always need to plan for more than one evacuation route. Though part of the route may be the same, you need alternate routes not only to your final destination, but also from your home, work, and the other areas you frequent.

If disaster strikes when you are on vacation or traveling, you have hopefully planned for that eventuality, as well. Most people will not take the time to make a detailed plan for every eventuality, but we nevertheless need to keep this possibility in

mind while away from our hometown. Remember, disasters and emergency situations can be even more catastrophic for those who are far from home.

Since you might be someplace else when disaster strikes, you also need general maps, and ideally topographic maps which show terrain and land features in great detail. Beyond this, you also need to develop an understanding of choke points, local dangers and high-crime areas to be avoided.



Moreover, for most of us, it's not just about getting out of the area, it's about getting out and being able to quickly rendezvous with our loved ones. That acknowledged, your plan needs to articulate when, and under what conditions, you abandon the local rendezvous plan in favor of meeting-up at your 'Plan-B' location.

Safety and the reality of current conditions may make it necessary for you to head out alone, and meet your family and

friends at your 'safe haven' final destination.

How do you know when to switch to 'Plan-B'? How do you know how long you should wait before abandoning the local rendezvous location and heading out to your more distant safe haven? And, how do you decide when to go looking for a missing family member vs. getting the rest of the family to safety?

The answers are in your plan. Or at least they should be. That is why it's so important to develop your own, personalized, evacuation plan. And why it is so important for each family member and friend involved, to understand the plan so that they know what to do, and when to do it.

Developing route options and establishing a distant safe haven isn't enough. You need to also answer "if, then..." questions because adaptability and resiliency are essential for a safe evacuation.

How to respond to disaster and emergency situations does not fit neatly into a one-size-fits-all task list. However, there are common needs which can be addressed.



Escape “From” vs. Escape “To”

It’s not enough to evacuate ‘from’ a danger area. You need to flee ‘to’ a safe place where you can ride out the danger. Oftentimes more people are harmed or killed in the aftermath of an emergency incident than by the actual event. We need to keep this in mind as we consider evacuation to a safe haven.

As important as timely evacuation is, it’s only one component of the equation. The formula for safety includes not only pre-planned evacuation routes, but also quick departure, readily accessible emergency supplies, and advance selection and preparation of a safe haven.

Unlike the masses who travel the evacuation routes prescribed by a government plan, your pre-planning gives you the opportunity to choose your destination. Don’t just plan a family rendezvous point and an evacuation route; be sure to pre-plan a suitable destination, too.

Where do you want your evacuation route to take you? Ideally to a pre-planned ‘safe haven’ retreat location which is safe and pre-stocked with emergency supplies.

Either way, it may be smart to go somewhere that is 20+ miles away from the displaced crowds who are fleeing the danger area. Preferably, a location that is not on a main road; a retreat area that is not easily accessed by those who become frustrated and leave the pack of escaping people. Increased violence, erratic behavior, and a shortage of supplies are attributes of displaced people. By preplanning, you have the opportunity to avoid this fate.

Remember too, though you may need to evacuate alone, or just with your immediate family, you cannot expect to sustain an extended emergency situation alone. Develop a team; create your own ‘community’ to deal with an extended emergency.



On the other hand, to depend on community ‘camps’ or refugee areas established by government agencies or relief organizations isn’t generally a good idea. Too often these simply trade one dangerous situation for another.

Those who pre-plan, prepare, and retreat to a well-selected safe haven, can often avoid internment in refugee or FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) camps. If you have the option, avoid these camps.

It’s far better to maintain your independence by retreating with a group of trusted friends and family to a private location: A retreat location prepared by you in advance, where your group can be self-sufficient and self-reliant; where you depend on each other for safety and security.

Notwithstanding, after taking time now to plan and prepare, when the emergency situation is actually upon you, the best evacuation advice is:

Get out early. Don't delay.

Even if you act on this foresight and establish a group retreat and a plan to evacuate together, it's not unusual for an individual, or part of the group, to not arrive at the rendezvous point in a timely manner. Consider this possibility now. Plan for it.

How long will you wait? Your plan needs to include this detail. If not, the delayed person may waste valuable time trying to get to you when they should be opting for 'Plan-B' and a different rendezvous location.



Moreover when you wait for them, your window of opportunity for a safe escape may close. You may become trapped by circumstances.

In advance, build into your plan the amount of time you will wait at your first rendezvous location. Then, when disaster strikes, stick to the plan; that way everyone knows what to expect, and what is expected of them.

For those who are elderly or with physical limitations, there is an even greater tendency to wait. Yet, this understandable inclination can make escape even more difficult. There is a fine line between waiting for family and friends who can help, and waiting too long and losing the opportunity to get to safety. This is yet another reason why it is advantageous to have pre-arranged routes, and secondary rendezvous locations, along the route to a 'safe haven' retreat location.

If you delay your departure as a result of waiting for someone, or to assemble more supplies, etc., you are asking for trouble. At the very least, you will likely get bogged down with the thousands of other people who waited. This doesn't just represent a time delay; it translates into increased danger. Every minute you delay represents increased danger.

Identifying sound evacuation route options and rendezvous locations is foundational to every personal emergency plan. Regrettably, in surveys taken among both adults and children regarding disaster preparedness, most were unable to recall the details of their family's plan, even when they remembered that a plan had been established. This is a solemn reminder that an outstanding emergency plan is only vapor if the participants can't remember the details.

Adaptability is another attribute that must be considered. Unfortunately, this aspect is also often neglected, rendering the plan irrelevant at the time when it is desperately needed.

Complexity hampers memory and the retention of plan details. Whereas an emergency plan with insufficient depth and adaptability, can make the plan ineffective. So what do we do?



Develop a brief, written “Plan Summary”

The solution is to develop an adaptable, flexible and resilient plan that is straightforward and easy to remember; a plan that is supported by a printed ‘Plan Summary’ which includes brief but specific reminders of the key details (and maps). A copy of this summary document should be kept in each person’s GO-Bag.

Maps, routing details, addresses, notes and reference materials are all useless if not readily available when disaster strikes. Your brief Plan Summary, along with maps marked with routes and related reference materials, needs to be included in each GO-Bag.

If you have a smart phone, store a PDF copy of the plan, and maps, etc. in your phone. The screen may be small and hard to read, but this back-up copy may prove to be invaluable.

Vigilance without adequate preparation is like a baseball player stepping up to the plate without a bat. Don’t leave important details to chance, or assume that the information will be remembered during a high-stress situation.

Just as a baseball player can’t expect to score a run without coaching and practice, you and your team need to get ready, too. Pre-planning, recollection of the plan’s details by everyone involved, and adaptability (contingency plans), are all essential components of every emergency plan.

Plan now; save lives later.

If you don’t have a plan, start today by making a basic bullet-point plan or numbered list that can be expanded over time. If you do have a plan, use this reminder as an opportunity to refresh your plan, and to remind each participant of the details.

When disaster strikes, most people will not stop to read a lengthy plan. This is a trait of human nature. Don’t expect to change it. You can mitigate this problem by making sure they are familiar with the plan in advance. If they understand the plan, then they are far more likely to use the Plan Summary to find the details they need but can’t remember.



Destination, home? Or, another location?

The best answer is both. But each member of your family (or group) needs to know where they should be heading, and the conditions or timing which will redirect them from the primary to a secondary destination. And, what route to take.

Invariably, when someone fails to arrive at the predetermined location, it is tempting to organize a search party to look for the missing person. Unfortunately, if you aren’t confident of the route which would have been taken, this may not just be a futile exercise, it may also be extremely dangerous.

Make decisions such as this in advance. In your Plan Summary document, be specific regarding timing, and under what conditions you will move to Plan-B.



Bugging-out from home or work to a safer, less-populated rural location

If you live or work in an urban or suburban area and disaster strikes, the best plan may be to get to a less populated area where self-sufficiency is possible. If the situation affects thousands of people, and it looks to be an emergency situation which will last for more than a few days, then you need to get out early, while you still can. You need to evacuate to a safe rural location.

If you wait until the masses of people arrive at the same conclusion, it may be too late. You may be trapped by traffic congestion, blocked roads or frustrated crowds; conditions which are often followed by violence.

Where will you go? How will you get there? What will you take with you?

Ideally, the selection of a retreat location is a decision to be made in advance, as part of your emergency plan. With advance planning, you have the opportunity to select a suitable location, make arrangements with the property owners, develop a team, stockpile supplies at that location, and to identify routing and transportation options for safe and expeditious travel.

Last minute decisions of this magnitude can often be disastrous if poorly conceived. Advance planning is imperative.

If your primary retreat location is many miles away, be sure to select a “Plan-B” location that is on the way, but within 1-2 days (or 1-2 nights) walking distance. For those who live in a major city, this Plan-B retreat may not be in a rural location, but rather a better place within the city; a location where you can congregate with other family and friends for mutual aid and improved safety.

Irrespective of whether your retreat location is rural or urban, community is essential for surviving an emergency situation that lasts more than a few days. If you can avoid it, don't try to go it alone.

Invariably those who bug-out early, before the rest of the population realizes their plight, are far more likely to reach safety. Delay can be deadly. But to leave for an non-specific location may also be deadly. Make your plans now, before you need them.

Recommended Reading: “[Strategic Relocation](#)” by Joel Skousen.



Route Selection

In an emergency situation, the shortest distance between two points may not be the best route to travel.

Environmental factors such as the effects of a storm and storm damage, traffic congestion, traffic signals not working, accidents and choke points created by bridges and tunnels, new dangers such as social unrest, or the expansion of high-crime areas, may make a circuitous and longer route far more prudent.

Remember, a multitude of factors may make car travel, subway, and commuter bus travel impossible. You need a back-up plan to these modes of transportation.

What is your best route if you find yourself walking instead of riding? Freeway routes may be too dangerous for foot travel. Major thoroughfares may offer the shortest travel time by vehicle, but they may not be the safest or fastest choice in an emergency situation.

Importantly, your usual routes which utilize major roadways are often miles longer than a more direct route which can be utilized by those who are walking or riding a bike.

Keep in mind that railroad tracks and above ground subway tracks may be more direct but not included on maps. Tracks and power line right-of-ways may be fine for walking, but these routes may actually be more tiring as your walking stride may be affected.

Factors such as these must be taken into account. It may seem like a bother, but when legal and possible, it is better to walk these routes in advance so that you know what to expect.

It is to your advantage to walk, or at least drive each alternative route, as maps never provide all the details you need. An emergency situation is not the time to find that your selected route has become inaccessible due to road changes, construction, new security fences, or the emergence of unsafe neighborhoods.

Use an indelible-ink pen (Sharpie) to mark your maps with routing and relevant route details. After you have traveled each route, produce an updated set for the GO-Bag belonging to each member of your group. Treat each map with AquaSeal Map Seal to protect it and make it more durable.



Not just evacuation routes, an 'Emergency Plan'

Anyone who has been in combat is acquainted with the adage, "No plan survives contact with the enemy." And the saying, "The plan is nothing, but planning is everything." These military truisms, which emphasize the importance of adaptability, are valid for our personal emergency plans, as well. Awareness, and an orientation to problem solving based in prior planning, is

necessary for timely decision making, prudent action, and resiliency.

Developing an emergency plan has huge benefits. It provides advantages such as the ability to make strategic decisions unhampered by stress, it gives you time to do research, the opportunity to obtain expert advice, and to select participants and get buy-in from them. Importantly, it gives you the opportunity to work on the plan together, and to obtain agreement on the details. By taking the time to actually develop a plan, all of this can be accomplished in advance.

Anticipate potential problems. Identify solutions. Build-in resiliency.

Your Emergency Plan doesn't need to be an elaborate document. Bullet-point details that are discussed can be enough – especially if the concept of writing a plan is so daunting that you won't do it. It's far better to have a detailed outline that is written and discussed, then to wait until someone writes it all down.

Every thinking person knows that an emergency plan is important. Unfortunately, the tyranny of the urgent often keeps us from getting to the things which are truly important. Don't let this happen to you.

Start now; don't wait until you have the time to make a plan exhaustive or professional looking. When you are done reading this, take a few minutes to outline a personal plan. Then, get a collection of maps to evaluate, and select which ones are best for this purpose.

A personal or family-and-friends plan needs to be simple yet specific, and at the same time resilient. Adaptability needs to be built into your plan. Decision making, and appropriate action, must be clear to each participant.

For example, if your spouse plans to take a certain route from work-to-home in the event of an emergency situation, then it is possible to search for them if they don't arrive home within a reasonable timeframe. Conversely, without this most basic detail, a timely and effective search is next to impossible, and may compound the problem rather than solve it.

When 'Plan-A' isn't possible, everyone needs to know when to switch to 'Plan-B.'



What to include in a personal Emergency Plan / Evacuation Plan

Don't delay. Take the time now to...

1. Investigate route options for getting to your gathering place, with departure points from the locations you and your family/friends frequent often. Identify at least four very different routes which will get you home or to your gathering

spot, with departure locations emanating from work sites, school, church, shopping, and other places you frequent.

Google Maps and similar online map resources can be helpful for this process, but don't limit your efforts to the high-traffic main-road type routes that computer software usually identifies. Back roads provide important alternatives. If you live in a flood-prone area, you will need to use a flood map or topographic (land features) map to help with your route planning.

2. Next, repeat the same exercise but for traveling on foot, and/or by bicycle.
3. Using a highly detailed paper map, identify your potential routes.
4. Drive or walk each route to verify viability of each. Measure time and distance for each route, and between obvious milestones, and note this information on your maps. During an emergency situation these times will likely be very different, but these details are still helpful.
5. Use this opportunity to make additional notations on your map using a fine-tip waterproof pen (Sharpie). Mark directly on your map the location of gas stations, convenience stores, nearby hospitals and emergency clinics, and police and fire stations. Add notations relating to sources of water, places to hide or sleep, possible rendezvous locations where you can comfortably wait for others, etc.
6. Mark your map with landmarks and other land features which will be helpful if street signs are missing. Since disasters can destroy signage and buildings, be sure to include structures and landmarks which will likely remain.
7. Now, transfer your route and notes to a fresh map, and make a similar map for each member of your family-and-friends evacuation group. Coat each map with a clear, waterproof sealer/durability-enhancer such as 'Map Seal' made by AquaSeal. After waiting several days to make sure each map is dry, fold and store each map-set in a large waterproof plastic bag which is large enough so that the map can be used without removing it from the bag. This will help protect your maps from damage during storage, and during use. Or better yet, use a waterproof map case such as the clear vinyl 'Dry Doc' Map Case made by Seattle Sports. Each vehicle, and each 'GO-Bag,' should have a set of these route maps.



Practice Your Plan

Walk or drive each route and alternative route. Or, you can make it fun for family and friends by making it into a Geocaching– type game. Most geocaching clubs utilize electronic devices, but you can create your own, similar games using just a map, compass, and 'clues' based on permanent land features. It's like a treasure hunt, but a game that provides serious benefits.

Additional Resources

Topographic Maps (www.USGS.gov): U.S. Geological Survey Store

Source for Map Seal, compass, map cases, etc. (www.REI.com): Recreational Equipment online

Tutorial on how to use a topographic map: GeoSTAC

Orienteering: How to Use a Compass

Recommended Compass: Cammenga 3H Military Compass with tritium dial

Recommended Budget Compass: SUUNTO A-30

Recommended Book: "Be Expert with Map and Compass: The Complete Orienteering Handbook" by Bjorn Kjellstrom and Carina Elgin

Recommended Book: "Strategic Relocation" Third Edition, by Joel Skousen.

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