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Continuity of Operations Planning Guide

OPSEM

The George Washington University
Office of Public Safety and Emergency Management

The George Washington University places great emphasis on the development and maintenance of continuity of operations plans (COOP). The purpose of continuity of operations plans is to establish priorities and procedures to sustain and restore operations that might be disrupted during an incident. Good planning is specific to each department and coincides with the policies and procedures of the University. There are many facets of a COOP, but the basic organization should address the department's critical functions, required resources, dependencies, alternatives, recovery particulars, communication issues, and financial considerations. The plan should also address those assumptions which went into the creation of the plan, and provide guidelines for implementation and dissemination of the plan to those covered by it. The COOP should be written with the purpose of sustaining organization and structure as well as addressing department-specific concerns. The guide should be explicit enough that even those external to the department may understand, sustain, and implement restoration of key functions. The following is a guide for continuity of operations planning and is not all-inclusive or exhaustive.

Introduction and Execution

The introduction section may be written last, after the department has identified and planned for its key functions. The introduction serves to give people who are less familiar with the department a brief overview of operations and priorities. The introduction should clearly identify the functional areas that the plan is written to protect.

It is important that the introduction identifies those circumstances which will require activation of the plan, and also lists those designated personnel who have the authority to make key decisions during and after an incident.

- Have you established the department's priorities and identified the University priority of "people first"?
- Is authority and responsibility specifically addressed?
- Who will activate the plan, and how will they do this?

Elements of the Plan

Critical Functions

In order to begin writing a COOP, a department must identify and itemize the daily and long-term functions/activities with which the department is critically involved. These key functions should include activities and deadlines that occur seasonally, as well as those that revolve around the academic or fiscal calendar. These functions should be prioritized to identify the functions that will need to be restored immediately and those that are critical but not immediately essential. It is important that the critical functions consider services provided to other departments as well as those required from other departments. The priority for sustaining them or the sequence of restoration may also affect the ability to fulfill other functions. That is, one function may be a prerequisite to perform others.

- Have the most critical functions been identified and prioritized, taking into account seasonal priorities?
- Are the functions discussed and detailed at a basic level, so that anyone can read the plan and have an idea of how things are done?

List of Required Resources

As part of your critical functions, please list the physical space, equipment and personnel required to fulfill the critical functions. This will help in managing the real prospect that you may have to operate from a different location, with limited equipment and supplies, and with a shortage of qualified personnel. Listing essential requirements may also help identify areas that need redundancies

established.

- Are essential personnel identified by title/qualifications?
- Are specific alternative spaces identified, and how have you ensured that they will be available to you during an incident? Does your department or personnel require any specific or unique requirements for an alternate space (special software, research materials, equipment, etc.)?
- Are spares of specialized equipment or supplies stored in current and alternative spaces to minimize disruption?

Dependencies and Interdependencies

Continuity planning, particularly in a university setting, requires departments to identify those other departments that they rely upon or to which they provide services. It should clearly identify services that are provided to you by other departments/organizations. It is critical that a continuity plan identifies these departments both internal and external to the University and ensures that support and assistance will continue to be mutually provided as needed.

- Does the plan account for services provided by other departments?
- Does the plan identify services provided to other departments?
- Can these services realistically be depended upon during an incident? If not, are there alternatives?
- Are contracts with partnering agencies specifically identified (including a list of contact information for vendors or other departments during an incident)?
- Are existing contracts concluded with conscious engagement of the contractors' own sustainability in an incident, and the likelihood that their services to the University will be needed even more during or after an incident?

Alternatives and Redundancies

During an incident, critical functions may need to be restored by alternative methods. These alternatives need to be realistic and require minimal cost and time. The COOP should address the restoration of key functions during both short-term and long-term disruptions, and estimate the duration for which the department would be able to maintain operations without its usual resources. The possibility of working from remote locations should be addressed, particularly if a department has VPN access. If this is not applicable to the department, the location of back-up data stored at a remote location (for example, data backed up onto flash drive) should be identified. This is also an ideal section to list any redundancy established by or for your department to support critical operations.

- Are the alternatives identified realistic, and not prohibitive due to cost or time?
- Have people been trained on how they will function at alternative locations?

Recovery and Restoration

The recovery stage of the COOP should identify the expected time-frame necessary to restore critical functions. This section may list the sequence of steps required to restore critical functions and also designate those aspects of the function that may be restored in parts. A list may be included with needed resources, important contacts, needed contracts, and any other items needed to facilitate restoration. Specific personnel should be designated, identified, and appropriately tasked for the effective restoration of critical operations. Back-up personnel may also be assigned in the event that key personnel is unavailable. Again, estimating a timeline for recovery and approximate recovery cost will help not only in response but also in preparation.

- Who will oversee restoration? In the event that specific personnel are unavailable, have back-ups been assigned?
- What guidance is needed from University leadership?
- Has a sequence of restoration been identified, and been broken down into parts where appropriate?
- How quickly will functions ideally be restored?

- Have you considered the cost required to restore operations? Do you have the necessary resources to facilitate restoration, or identified the process for obtaining resources?

Assumptions

It is very reasonable that a COOP would be written based on a set of assumptions. Listing these assumptions is critical because they might not be visible to everyone in the department. Keep in mind that assumptions should also be realistic. It is important that these assumptions do not make you overly reliant on other departments or University services. For example, a commonly used assumption is that the GWorld card system would be working during an incident and enable staff and faculty to enter needed buildings and offices. Another assumption may be that ISS is operational and that Banner, Oracle, and other programs are available, or that the Registrar is open and able to reassign classroom and office space. Identifying assumptions is an empowering objective and should not be used to avoid individual and departmental planning. Your plan's usefulness is directly related to your stated assumptions.

- Are the assumptions specific?
- Are they reasonable and realistic?
- Are they clearly identified?

Communications

Effective communication is critical during an incident. Departments need to identify incident communication methods and those requirements needed to fulfill the identified communications methods. Communication strategies need to indicate methods for communicating up, down, across, and out. This is a logical place to include departmental contact lists and helpful internal and external points of contact. For example, they could include the Registrar's Office, ISS, or contractors who support your department's efforts. As a reminder, departments may request to have incident-related information posted on the Campus Advisories website.

- How do you plan on communicating with faculty, staff, vendors, and students during an incident?
- Have the requirements for these communication methods been identified?
- Have you established alternative communication strategies?
- Are specific and detailed instructions included for the use of phone trees, website updates, list-servs, etc?

Financial Components

During an incident, departments will likely accrue additional expenses necessary to maintain or restore operations. It is critical that departments identify a method for tracking incident-related expenses. Please visit Annex X in the Incident Manual for further guidance: (<http://www.gwu.edu/~response/>).

- Are personnel who have the authority to make purchases aware of the University system for tracking expenses?
- Has the financial manager for the department been consulted about the specifics for the plans?
- Who will fulfill the responsibilities of the financial manager if he or she is unavailable?
- If a cost estimate has been conducted for your department, has this information been included?

Implementation

A plan that is designed to restore critical operations needs to be implemented by all available key members of the organization. After the plan is finalized, the members of the department must be given copies and made aware of your department's plans for sustaining critical components. For implementation purposes, each department will identify someone to explain the plan and provide a written copy to each existing and future employee, and to routinely provide updated copies as revisions are incorporated. It is also critical that continuity plans are exercised and tested regularly. It is critical that the plan include a system for testing and maintaining the plan and its

functions.

- Is there a schedule for reviewing the plan?
- Who will be responsible for updating the materials?
- Who will provide copies of the plan to all departmental employees?

In Conclusion...

Continuity of operations planning serves to identify critical job functions and identify alternative methods to maintain operations in the event of a disruption. Continuity planning needs to specifically address what the functions are, how they are done normally, realistic alternatives, recovery goals and processes, assumptions, communication methods and a system for implementing the plan. The section that has been most often omitted in a department's COOP development has been the financial management aspect of incident planning and recovery. Please note that this area is essential.

Annex B of the Incident Manual (<http://www.gwu.edu/~response/aboutannexb.cfm>) is dedicated to continuity of operations planning, provides training materials, and makes other department plans visible to the GW community. For security, the Incident Manual is password protected but accessible by faculty and staff. The manual includes a collection of resources to guide each department through the development of plans and to provide University information pertinent to continuity planning. The Incident Manual is important during an incident because nearly all completed plans are available online and accessible from a variety of locations.