

Preparing for COVID-19 in Your Community

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Create a Medical Emergency Response Team

A trained team can help protect your flock

In some medical emergencies, minutes can mean the difference between life or death. Is your church ready to respond?

If he'd intended to add a dramatic note to his presentation on a church building addition, Gus Sideris couldn't have done a better job. While explaining financing plans, he slumped to the floor in front of some 300 people attending a business meeting at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Warsaw, Indiana. His heart had stopped beating.

Sideris, the church's coordinator of outreach ministries, was on the floor only a few seconds before two physicians and several nurses at the meeting rushed to his side. One doctor performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation; another called an ambulance. Emergency medical service personnel arrived within minutes and revived Sideris with their defibrillator, then took him to a local hospital. "If I hadn't received medical attention almost immediately, I would have died on the spot," he says.

Fortunately, Sideris recovered from the event, but it caused his church to consider what emergency medical programs it should have in place. If you visit the church today, you'll find an automated external defibrillator (AED) mounted on the wall of the vestibule. Further, there's now a designated team of volunteers in place to handle medical emergencies, and key staff members of the church and its preschool receive annual training in emergency medical procedures from EMS personnel.

What Churches Should Do to Prepare

Episodes of sudden cardiac arrest, like the one that almost claimed Gus Sideris' life, cause about 325,000 American deaths each year. With many churches seeing an increase in the number of their members over age 65, the risk of a cardiovascular emergency of some kind happening during a church event is on the rise.

Sideris' story highlights the kind of medical emergency that churches should be prepared to handle, said Steve Edmonds, risk control specialist for Brotherhood Mutual. "In fact, churches should have a comprehensive emergency preparedness plan which encompasses every foreseeable 'worst-case scenario' that might happen," he said. Medical emergencies represent one section of that plan. He suggests that churches take these steps:

Designate a medical response team. Edmonds recommends that churches develop a volunteer medical response team (<http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/publications/the-deacons-bench-newsletter/the-deacons-bench-medical-response/>), preferably composed of medical professionals such as physicians, nurses, and emergency medical technicians. The team should include several people as backup, he warns. "Just when something really serious happens, your top people may be on vacation."

Ideally, the list of emergency medical volunteers would be deep enough to allow at least two people present at all regular services, in addition to any other church events or activities.

For churches without medical professionals, he suggests asking for volunteers and offering them classes in first aid, CPR, and AED use. "Remember that the team's role is simply to provide basic emergency care and stabilize victims until the professionals get there," Edmonds explained.

At one church Edmonds visited, the emergency response team was seated together in a specially designated pew. "With the team worshipping together," he noted, "they could be easily located in case there was an emergency. If the pastor needed them, he knew exactly where to look."

At some churches, the emergency medical team is part of a larger mission. The Avalon Missionary Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, offers a health and wellness ministry, led by a team of eight nurses. In addition to emergency response, the ministry offers church members a variety of health-related services, ranging from educational seminars to counseling and periodic health screening services.

Once an emergency response team is established, churches should let the congregation know that it exists and who's involved. Avalon Missionary posts team members' names in various locations in the church so that they can be

quickly summoned in the event of an emergency, and it also gives the list to ushers.

Line up the right equipment. AEDs

(<http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-forms/setting-up-an-aed-program-checklist/>) are becoming standard safety equipment in many public places, which should increasingly include churches, Edmonds said. AEDs work by analyzing the heart's rhythm and prompting users to deliver a defibrillation shock if one is needed. Early treatment with an AED can increase the survival rate of sudden cardiac arrest victims tenfold, according to the American Heart Association.

In addition, churches should stock first-aid kits

(<http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/safety-library/risk-management-articles/disasters-emergencies-and-health/accidents-and-medical-response/first-aid-be-ready-to-respond/>), Edmonds said. He recommends not buying them from the local department store. Instead, you should purchase an institutional first-aid kit, which is larger and more comprehensive. Contact a professional first-aid kit supplier, such as Afassco, Zee Medical, or Cintas, for assistance. Also buy a CPR kit, which includes protective airway masks to help prevent mouth-to-mouth contamination.

Finally, line up volunteers who regularly carry cell phones to serve as designated emergency communicators. They can provide critical help by dialing 911 or other emergency numbers.

Invest in training. “One of the most critical things you can have in an emergency is a cool head, which comes from knowing what to do and practicing it,” Edmonds said. Churches should consider enrolling key staff members and volunteers in training for first aid, CPR, and AED skills. Classes are offered at little or no cost by a number of organizations around the country.

In addition, training helps responders

(<http://www.brotherhoodmutual.com/resources/webinars-on-demand/church-safety-security-medical-response-webinar/>) know what not to do. Edmonds recalled a boy who climbed a tall bookcase at one church, then fell, bringing the bookcase and its contents down on top of him. His mother promptly scooped him up, an action that later resulted in medical problems for her son. “If emergency responders had been present, they’d have realized that the boy should not be moved without proper bracing,” he explained.

Taking Care of Each Other

While it's never possible to know exactly what might happen, churches can take several important proactive steps to manage almost any emergency medical situation. "Most churches just want to do whatever they can to help their people," Edmonds said. "They understand that means creating the safest possible environment in church."

For Gus Sideris and countless others each year who suffer a medical crisis at church, that's a powerful—possibly even life-saving—commitment.



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