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Despite mass earthquake evacuations, staying in place should be a key facet of disaster plans

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Shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and the anthrax attacks that followed closely behind, three buzzwords for emergency response gained traction: "Shelter in place."

The logic behind sheltering is simple enough: Better to be protected inside when it's not necessarily safe to be outside. As the Federal Protective Service wrote in its 2007 report on developing occupant emergency plans, "Releasing a large number of employees onto the roads and public transportation will only add to the confusion and panic."

The rare, 5.8 magnitude Aug. 23 earthquake proved a good test of sheltering in place. And yet, what did most people do? They ran outside.

"That was a learning experience," says **Kathy Barnes, Akridge** senior vice president for property management. "We should have all sheltered in place, probably. We'd never thought about earthquakes. We are now."

The earthquake, while it rattled the region, should not spur a wholesale revision of emergency plans, experts say. Rather, it should be viewed by employers and property

owners as an opportunity to identify holes in their disaster-response strategies and drill their workers and tenants on the value of sheltering in place.

"It's continuous learning," says **Leona Agouridis**, executive director of the **Golden Triangle Business Improvement District**, home to 84,000 downtown D.C. employees. "The best plan is flexible enough so that it adapts to whatever the situation is."

After the earthquake, Agouridis says, "I know that people have been going back through their plans. What did we learn coming out of that earthquake that we can make our plan better?"

The Golden Triangle BID, headquartered in the Bender Building at 1120 Connecticut Ave. NW, was the home base for a pilot program of the Shelter-in-Place Project, a federally funded effort of the All Hazards Consortium that is "designed to engage people in their own emergency preparedness and to educate the public and private sector on effective shelter-in-place preparation."

A test run, held in the spring, included seven Bender Building tenants: the **American Bankers Association**, **Blake Real Estate Inc.**, the BID, architecture firm Karn Charuhas Chapman & Twohey, the Police Executive Research Forum, the **Women's Business Enterprise National Council** and Washington Analysis.

They were given this scenario: "A truck bomb has exploded just south of the White House, and emergency responders indicate it to be a 'dirty bomb' or a bomb with radioactive materials. Everyone within a one-mile radius of the White House should shelter in place immediately. The duration of sheltering in place may be 12 to 24 hours. Stay tuned for more information as it becomes available."

The test was successful, according to a July consortium report, in that it "caused an important shift in the mental mindset" of the participants, who had long relied on evacuation as the default action in an emergency. It led some organizations to "reconsider the initial plan to drive everyone out of the building."

"That's why we're working on this project, to give people an alternative to their first reaction: to leave," says **Janet Clements**, former deputy director of the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, who is leading the pilot effort for the consortium. "When something bad happens, they want to go outside and see what happened. In most cases, that's not the best action."

After Sept. 11, says Akridge's Barnes, building clients and owners are "more likely to participate and expect safety drills, preparedness drills and help with their planning." They are things, she says, that "we've always tried to do but haven't always gotten the buy-in."

The interest is key. If tenants aren't engaged in their own safety, then they won't be prepared for an emergency. Depending on the crisis, sheltering in place can last a few hours or a few days. It's something people must be ready for — from having a couple of days worth of prescription drugs on hand to maintaining access to land-line phones.

The Shelter-in-Place Project, funded by a **Federal Emergency Management Agency** regional catastrophic preparedness grant, is a grass-roots effort, Clements says, an interactive process driven by discussions of specific scenarios that grab participants' interest — and hold it.

"Shelter in place has the connotation of duct tape," Agouridis says. "It's the government talking to you and telling you what to do. Adults are just so much smarter than that. People need to feel they've defined that for themselves."

The consortium is planning a follow-up test at a second Golden Triangle building to work out some kinks and further develop the program before expanding to other major cities. And just in time for that follow-up, the Shelter-in-Place Project leaders have another disaster to consider: East Coast earthquakes.

"I don't necessarily think that people need to start writing earthquake plans," Clements says. "Instead they need to incorporate earthquake preparedness into their emergency plans."

Michael Neibauer covers economic development, chambers of commerce, transportation and politics.