



Cooling Contingency Planning: Preparing for Catastrophic Failure

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Being prepared for the unexpected is good management practice. In addition to the daily operational management plans in place at any healthcare facility – dictated in many cases by specific, stringent practices required by the Joint Commission (JCAHO) – most hospitals and medical centers have contingency plans at the ready to help manage the consequences of such operational interruptions or system failures as a power outage, fire, computer failure, or chemical spill.

Advance planning in the case of a possible catastrophic building system failure is particularly critical. A failure of the heating, ventilation and air conditioning system (HVAC) could quite literally represent a life and death situation. But a well-crafted, up-to-date Cooling Contingency Plan can reduce such risks, add to or improve component redundancy, and prepare the facility for the rapid deployment of temporary equipment needed to sustain critical operations in the event of an emergency and to recover from a disaster.

The benefits of such a plan can include protecting or minimizing operational emergencies, promoting the health and safety of both healthcare providers and patients, and otherwise managing or reducing the economic, legal, and other long-term implications that could spawn from the negative results of a major HVAC system failure.

Crafting the Plan

To begin crafting a Cooling Contingency Plan, first start by addressing the possible consequences of a major HVAC outage – and ask the following questions:

- How dependent are critical and on-going operations, equipment and advanced technology, facilities, information systems, and other resources on comfort cooling or process chilled water?
- What effect would there be on such operations if the cooling system failed or needed to be shut down for unplanned service?
- What would be the cost of not having cooling for an hour, a day, or a week? Qualify and quantify the impact and related costs.

In addition, determine which individuals understand the consequences of a failure. Who thoroughly comprehends the interplay and dependence between the facility's critical operations and the environmental system? Who has in-depth expertise in and experience with the details of the facility's HVAC systems – and the available alternatives?

The answers to these questions will help create the outline of what's to be included in the plan and identify the players who need to be involved.



The critical success factors in the development of a Cooling Contingency Plan are leadership buy-in and support, understanding “critical needs” versus current needs; preparing for a “worst case” scenario; developing, filing and practicing a formal plan, and keeping the plan current.

Key Components

Realizing the need for a plan, like any initiative, is the first critical step of the process. The second is assembly of the team that will develop the plan. A successful team will have covered all the bases in terms of knowledge and experience – leveraging expertise from both on-staff personnel and outside experts, such as insurance providers, system and control manufacturers and consulting engineers.

Key components of the plan should include provisions to:

- Document the current HVAC equipment in use, ranging from critical HVAC system information to component details.
- Identify potential sources of failure, the probability of failure and document the cooling required to maintain critical areas.
- Match specific equipment and all required connection components needed to support critical areas. Determine required response time frame and budget.

- Determine the appropriate location for the temporary equipment and the logistics required to set it in place, as well as electrical and water connection points. Additionally, assignments will need to be made for what roles and responsibilities each entity will undertake.
- Determine how to adopt the existing system and controls to better prepare the facility for the use of a temporary solution.
- File, review, train and update the response plan and system specifics on a regular basis.
- Conduct periodic cooling contingency drills.

While examining the HVAC system during contingency plan development, the team may find areas to improve the system’s operation, reliability or energy efficiency.

For instance, if the critical components are aged or have become unreliable, it may be prudent to overhaul or repair them. There also may be substantial benefit in upgrading or replacing existing components with reliable, more energy efficient solutions. These opportunities are worth investigating as they could provide significant and immediate gains in performance, while providing a strong return on investment.

For hospitals and medical centers, the successful implementation a Cooling Contingency Plan – immediately and seamlessly upon demand – is quite simply “mission critical.”

In terms of risk management, the advance planning and preparedness involved in developing and providing ongoing support for a Cooling Contingency Plan is clearly a smart investment against the very real risks that an interruption could bring to human life and well-being. A Cooling Contingency Plan is a strategic investment well made.



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