



By James Careless

# WHY EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLANS (ERP) ARE A CRITICAL BUSINESS NECESSITY

In a world with rising man-made and natural threats to transportation systems, preparing for such events through emergency response plans (ERPs) is vital.

An ERP is a well-researched, documented strategy that outlines the procedures to be followed during an emergency. When disaster hits, having an ERP in place ensures that staff know what to do to protect lives, minimize damage, and move toward a swift recovery.

## WHY ERP MATTERS

Talk to the experts, and you'll find they agree on one key point: emergency response planning is a critical business necessity.

Ron Mildiner is the director of customer success at SureScan Corporation, which manufactures security screening equipment (specifically computed tomography or CT). His experience offers a sobering perspective:



Ron Mildiner, SureScan

Prior to May 31, 2025, Mildiner was the deputy federal security director at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) and was the senior TSA executive on duty following the January 29, 2025 crash between American Airlines 5342 and a U.S. Army UH-60, which resulted in 67 fatalities.

Given his personal experience, Mildiner knows how severe transportation disasters rattle transportation staff. "Following the initial crisis or accident, most employees fall into a quiet state of panic that renders them essentially frozen," he told TSI magazine. "By having an established ERP, you can begin breaking through the shock and give them established direction, to include checklists, that allows them to concentrate on the task at hand while not being overwhelmed by the crisis."



Brian Toolan, Everbridge

Brian Toolan is vice president of public safety at Everbridge, a company that digitally manages all phases of critical event management — from preparedness to response and recovery — for its clients. "Once an event happens, you have to know who's going to be responsible to handle it," Toolan said. "Having your plans prepared in advance also allows you to better understand what you might be facing. For instance, for an aircraft accident or issue, you want to better understand what type of aircraft it could be, how many people could be affected, what type of fuel or chemicals might be released, and what the impact to the community and environment might be. All these things shouldn't be figured out at the time of an event. You



Jennifer Stansberry Miller, Empathia

need to plan in preparation for when they will happen."

Jennifer Stansberry Miller is the director of crisis solutions at Empathia. She helps organizations build resilience before a crisis, respond effectively during an event, and recover with compassion afterwards. "Preparing for a crisis and developing an effective emergency response plan is not only right for a brand, but it is also a regulatory expectation in sectors such as aviation and passenger rail," said Stansberry Miller. "Having experienced the aftermath of a transportation crash, I have seen how the absence of a coordinated response creates secondary trauma for those directly impacted. For the company, it causes confusion, employee frustration, and reputational harm, all of which are avoidable today through emergency response planning."

### BENEFITS OF ERPs

Companies and organizations who have ERPs in place receive many benefits when disasters actually occur.

Minimizing business damage is one key benefit. "A serious incident can result in millions of dollars in downtime, lawsuits, and fines," Stansberry Miller said. "The organizational impact is lost trust, brand damage, and trauma to employees and the public. Research shows preparedness works. Even a minor runway excursion costs more than \$30,000, but targeted training is far cheaper. Effective planning and training can cut incident costs by up to 50 percent."

Another benefit is legal liability reduction. "If you're not prepared when the investigation completes from the government side, fines can be in the millions," said Toolan. "Having an ERP in place and then following it will be taken into account during such investigations, and can help to reduce your potential legal liability."

A third benefit of ERPs is strengthened staff morale, which is vital to have during the after-event recovery process. After all, employees anchor recovery. Those whose leaders prepared a thorough ERP beforehand and then executed it well during an event will be better supported by staff afterwards than those leaders who were caught unprepared and tried to muddle through.

The takeaway: "Across all modes, the pattern is clear," Stansberry Miller observed. "Airlines that invest in safety audits cut accident risk in half. Highway training programs reduce crashes and clearance times. Maritime safety systems lower costs, and pipeline safeguards prevent disasters. In every sector, robust emergency response planning is the most cost-effective insurance against failure."

"For transportation companies, preparedness is essential for long-term success," concluded Mildiner. "Emergency response planning, supported by training, coordinated communication, and customer protocols, protects lives, stabilizes operations, and sustains trust. Embedding these practices strengthens resilience and reputation. A culture of readiness enables organizations to respond to crises with confidence."

### HOW TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE ERP

Creating an effective emergency management plan is a structured process that blends strategy and practicality. "The first step is a comprehensive risk and gap assessment to identify and prioritize hazards by their likelihood and impact," said Stansberry Miller. "This grounds the plan in reality, not assumptions."

"You need to know what you are up against," Toolan said. "You need to know what you're trying to solve — two areas



*Once an ERP has been created, the plan must be supported by resources and training. For the ERP to be effective, the training process must be detailed, properly supported and recurrent.*

in which Everbridge's software helps people to develop their ERPs."

The human factor is a key consideration. "Formulating an effective ERP requires consideration of the roles of the actual responders and needs to involve them up front in the planning process," said Mildiner. "When considering a given crisis, it's generally straightforward to figure out who will need to be involved and what each responder will need to do."

Clear leadership and decision-making authority is essential in a crisis and needs to be defined in the ERP. Every employee must understand their role and the chain of command. "The point of an effective ERP is to establish some order and lines of demarcation so that the right people and the right equipment arrive at the right place and at the right time," Mildiner said. "An ERP also serves as a collection of all the appropriate POCs, telephone numbers, maps, and layouts so that when a crisis occurs, a coordinator can grab the plan and begin immediately."

Clarity is also vital in all aspects of

communication. "The ERP should detail internal and external communication protocols," said Stansberry Miller. "Employees need clear channels, while customers, families, regulators, and the public require timely, accurate updates. Clear communication prevents chaos." (We will dig more into communication later on in this article.)

Detailed checklists are a key element of an effective ERP. Just as a shopping list ensures no items are missed, checklists help employees know what to do during a crisis, preventing critical omissions.

"Aside from ensuring that nothing significant is missed, a checklist helps break through the initial shock that impacts responders," Mildiner told TSI. "A checklist gives them something to hold, read, concentrate on, and most important — to do. When a responder's mind is racing under the burden of the crisis, a checklist gives him/her a template to follow to complete the necessary tasks."

"Checklists help you to account for each person's responsibility," said

Toolan. "Once you identify all the risks and hazards associated with what you're trying to accomplish, you then need to know who's going to be responsible for making sure all of that has been done and documented. Checklists help you to assign responsibility to individuals and then follow up to make sure those responsibilities have been completed. Once you can do that, you can have a better feeling that you've accomplished your mission."

"In fact, checklists are at the core of an emergency response plan," Stansberry Miller said. "They turn strategy into action and clarify responsibilities. But remember: Checklists must be kept current. They should be reviewed regularly, especially after operational changes or real incidents, so they remain useful in practice."

Once an ERP has been created, the plan must be supported by resources and training. For the ERP to be effective, the training process must be detailed, properly supported, and recurrent.

“Invest in people, equipment, technology, and time for drills,” she recommended. “A notable example is U.S. Airways Flight 1549, also known as the Miracle on the Hudson. The successful evacuation and support for 155 people were possible because protocols were followed and communication was strong. When the crisis struck, the plan worked because it had been tried.”

Finally, an effective ERP is a living document. It follows a continuous improvement cycle comprising assessment, implementation, practice, and review. In this way, the ERP keeps up with the times as technologies change and threats evolve. It also ensures that the ERP undergoes constant executive oversight and adaptation, so that it remains useful.

To this end, “review the plan regularly, at least annually, and following every incident, to ensure it remains relevant to the organization’s current operating conditions,” said Stansberry Miller. “Updates should address new threats and refine protocols using lessons learned from exercises and real-world events. Key takeaway: Successful organizations view emergency planning as a continuous cycle of assessment, implementation, practice, and improvement.”

## THE MANY ROLES OF COMMUNICATION

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We previously noted the importance of communication in an effective ERP. Its critical role warrants a more detailed discussion.

Communication plays many roles in the successful execution of an ERP. A case in point: “Communication and coordination with external entities will either make or break a response to a crisis,” Mildiner said. “A couple of ERP-based communications decisions served me very well in the immediate aftermath of the crash of AA 5342 in January 2025. First, every organization should have a communication or coordination center that is tasked with collecting and disseminating information. With that said, as a leader during a crisis, you need to remain available to receive

information and make decisions. Hence, you must delegate the responsibility of communicating with a coordination center to a subordinate you keep next to you throughout the crisis. Second, establish two text groups: one for your direct reports, and one for your boss (bosses). Text messaging, while impersonal, is fast and can reach a group of people instantaneously. It can keep your chain of command informed, pass on directions to subordinates, and keep you available for truly important calls.”

Next, the communication of factual, timely information is vital during man-made and natural disasters. “It was identified as the top need when the NTSB established its Transportation Disaster Assistance division following the passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act,” said Stansberry Miller. “Survivors and impacted families consistently seek factual, timely information above anything else. Without it, they are left vulnerable to misinformation, confusion, or even receiving inaccurate death notifications — failures that deepen trauma and erode trust. This is why an effective emergency response plan clearly outlines who is authorized to coordinate and release information to law enforcement, regulators, the media, survivors, and affected families. A strong plan also incorporates a dedicated family assistance component, addressing the fundamental concerns of those impacted.”

The release of factual, timely information is also vital for managing the media successfully. Despite the tropes that play out in movies and on TV, most journalists want to be helpful during emergencies. But they still have to feed the beast that is the 24-hour news cycle. If your organization doesn’t provide them with that meat, someone else will.

“This is why it is important to keep the media on a scheduled briefing rotation to control the narrative and provide the information they need, preventing them from seeking out other, potentially less accurate, sources,” Toolan advised. “If you’re scheduling regular briefings and you’re holding to those briefing

timelines, you’re giving them the information they need.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING AND REVIEWS

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Another area that deserves more emphasis is the importance of ERP training (including exercises) and reviews. “Training exposes weaknesses and ensures all components such as communication systems and accountability processes are functioning and external partners are aligned,” said Stansberry Miller. “Ultimately, you will perform the way you train — there are no shortcuts.”

Reviews keep ERPs up to date and relevant. “A plan must be revisited at least annually and after every incident/drill to integrate lessons learned and evolve with the organization,” she said.

In particular, “you can’t learn unless you do an after action review (AAR),” said Toolan. “No plan is foolproof. Everything’s going to have some sort of need to improve. It could be small, it could be large, but you won’t be able to do that improvement unless you do an AAR first.”

Whatever the reason for the review, it needs to be conducted in a blame-free environment with the sole goal of improving the plan. If the “blame game” is played, employees will not be forthcoming, the ERP will not be improved, and the consequences may then be played out during the next incident with disastrous results.

## THE BOTTOM LINE: ERPs ARE A MUST

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All of the information that the experts above have detailed about ERPs leads to one inescapable conclusion: In today’s high-pressure, high-stakes transportation industry, having an ERP is an absolute must.

“The absence of a solid and practiced ERP will lead to confusion and delayed response,” Mildiner warned. “In the age of social media, your response (or lack thereof) will be viewed by the public almost in real time, and a clearly inadequate ERP will be judged and



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potentially exploited by members of the public.”

“Brand reputation is probably one of the biggest casualties for companies who fail to have adequate ERPs, are hit with disasters, and then have to weather the public consequences,” said Toolan. “If I don’t feel comfortable that a specific airline will mitigate harm to that aircraft prior to me getting on it, I’m going to reevaluate whether I want to take that airline. The same thing is true

with other transportation and logistics agencies.”

“In today’s environment, there are no excuses for not having an emergency response plan in place,” Stansberry Miller said. “The consequences of neglect are both immediate and lasting. As someone with lived experience, I know what it feels like when a response fails. The bravado, politics, and lack of coordination all contributed to hindering the healing process for survivors, families, and the

affected community. The scars of that failure endure.”

Fortunately, the preventative solution to this abysmal outcome is straightforward and accessible, she noted: “Invest in an emergency response plan, its process, and your people. Build a comprehensive ERP, assign the right individuals to the right roles, and continually review and refine the plan. Practice builds readiness, and readiness protects both individuals and their reputations.” 

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## Are you prepared to deal with the aftermath of an accident ?

Accidents and serious incidents are relatively rare events that typically involve complex, challenging and stressful situations. Organizations may have little experience in dealing with these events, but they can significantly reduce the negative impact of them with preparation, training, and solid council.



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