



Continuity of Operations (COOP) Awareness Training

I. What is COOP?

Continuity of Operations (COOP) is being able to continue doing the things that are most important despite the effects of an emergency.

The ultimate goal of continuity in the Executive branch is the continuation of National Essential Functions (NEFs). To achieve that goal, agencies, like the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), have identified Primary Mission Essential Functions (PMEFs) and Mission Essential Functions (MEFs) that support NEFs to ensure these functions can be continued throughout, or resumed rapidly after, a disruption of normal activities.

To continue these essential functions in the workplace during an emergency, employees may need to provide assistance. When involved with COOP activities, employees could be required to work away from home or under different conditions, such as working outside regular business hours. As such, they will need to identify and plan for their family's essential needs as well, so that they can be prepared to assist in COOP activities without worrying about the well-being of their family.

This guide can help you understand what is involved with COOP planning so that you can prepare your family in the event of an emergency.

II. Why Plan for COOP?

In addition to maximizing the capability of organizations to continue essential functions in an emergency, COOP plans also enable:

- Direction to be provided to employees, ensuring that they know what to do.
- Damage to be minimized and loss of life to be reduced.
- Disruptions to work and home life to be minimized and normalcy to be sustained, as much as possible.
- Recovery from disruptions and resumption of full services to be implemented in a timely manner.
- Critical assets, information, equipment and facilities to be protected.

COOP planning is the good business practice of ensuring the execution of Executive branch essential functions by reducing the impact of disruptive events to manageable levels so agencies and organizations can continue to operate in all-hazards emergencies.

All-hazards emergencies include:

- Natural disasters
- Man-made crises
- Technological incidents
- National security emergencies (i.e., acts of terrorism)



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III. COOP vs. Occupant Emergency Plan (OEP)

Even though ensuring the safety of all agency personnel is an important aspect of COOP plans, there is a difference in the overall objective between a COOP plan and an OEP.

OEPs establish short-term procedures for safeguarding lives and property in and around facilities during emergencies, such as evacuation and shelter-in-place procedures.

COOP plans ensure the continued performance of essential functions from alternate sites during an emergency that may disrupt normal business operations for longer periods of time.

Depending on the emergency, the COOP plan may be implemented at the same time as the OEP, or after an assessment of the facility. The following scenario is provided to help illustrate the relationship between these plans:

SCENARIO: Fire in the facility.

OEP: Activated to evacuate the facility and account for employees.

COOP plan: A damage assessment would be conducted, which may include the Facility Assessment Team (FAT) and/or General Services Administration (GSA), fire department and other public safety organizations with responsibilities for that facility.

- If it is determined that operations can safely be restored within 12-72 hours, the COOP plan would not be activated.
- If it is determined that operations can't be safely restored within 12-72 hours, the COOP plan would be activated.

***If your office COOP Plan is activated or you are in an area affected by a disaster:

- ✓ **Evacuate** to safety
- ✓ **Report** your status within 24 hours to:
 - Your supervisor / office or follow procedures directed by your facility; or
 - Accountability Call Center at 866-233-0152 when activated. The call center # is only available when activated for personnel accountability during an emergency.

***If you cannot report your status using the items listed above, contact the VBA Integrated Operations Center (VBAIOC), Watch Officer Desk at (202) 461-0270 or vbaioc.vbaco@va.gov. ***

- ✓ **Be prepared** to provide support to your Emergency Relocation Group



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(ERG) and/or Office COOP Manager.

IV. Basic Elements of a Viable COOP Plan are:

- Essential functions
- Delegations of authority
- Orders of succession
- Continuity facilities
- Continuity communications
- Vital records
- Human capital management
- Tests, Training and Exercise Program (TT&E)
- Devolution of control and direction
- Reconstitution

Essential Functions

Essential functions are the critical activities that enable an agency to provide vital services to maintain the safety of its employees and the public, and preserve its financial and industrial situation.

In identifying and prioritizing essential functions, agencies will distinguish between PMEFS and MEFs.

PMEFS

PMEFS are agency essential functions that must be performed in order to support the performance of the NEFs.

PMEFS are defined as functions that:

- Need to continue uninterrupted; or
- Be resumed within 12 hours after an event; and
- Be maintained for up to 30 days or until normal operations can be resumed.

MEFs

MEFs are a limited set of agency-level government functions that:

- Provide vital services
- Exercise civil authority
- Maintain the safety of the general public
- Sustain the industrial and economic base



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VBA MEFs

MEF	OWNER
Pay veterans and beneficiaries (ORM/Hines/Austin)	Chief Financial Officer (24)
Pay insurance disbursements, collect remittances, and service policies (Ins/Philadelphia ROIC)	Insurance Service (29)
Make housing available in support of Emergency Support Function 6, National Response Framework	Loan Guaranty Service (26)

Delegations of Authority

Delegations of authority transfer the ability to authorize and make decisions in an emergency to ensure:

- The continued operation of departments/agencies and their essential functions.
- Rapid response to any emergency situation requiring COOP plan implementation.

Orders of Succession

Orders of succession specify how leadership is transferred, when necessary. They make provisions for the assumption of senior agency leadership positions during an emergency when the incumbents are unable to execute their legal duties.

Continuity Facilities

Continuity facilities are locations other than the normal facility that are used to carry out essential functions in a COOP situation.

Continuity facilities may make use of an existing agency or another space.

VBA Regional Offices use work brokering instead of continuity facilities.

Continuity Communications

Continuity communications are communications that provide the capability to



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perform essential functions, in conjunction with other agencies and organizations, until normal operations can be resumed.

Vital Records

Vital records include electronic and hardcopy documents, references and records needed to support essential functions during a COOP situation.

There are two categories of vital records:

1. Emergency operating records

These are records needed to continue during an emergency and resume normal operations after an emergency.

Examples of emergency operating records include COOP plans and procedures, medical emergency contact details, disaster recovery plans, etc.

2. Legal and financial rights records

These are records needed to recreate legal and financial operations, and to safeguard the interests of the organization, employees and clients.

Examples of legal and financial rights records include payroll data, insurance policies, Veterans' records, etc.

Human Capital Management

Managing human capital involves placing the right people in the right jobs to perform essential functions. It also involves ensuring that all employees have a clear understanding of what to do in an emergency.

Protocols for identifying and assisting special-needs employees should be included in COOP plans.

Test, Training & Exercises (TT&E)

TT&E programs test and assess the readiness and effectiveness of COOP plans. TT&E program goals:

- Train VBA Emergency Response Group (ERG) members in functional areas of mission readiness.
- Provide opportunities to acquire skills and knowledge required to perform assigned ERG role.
- Reflect lessons learned from TT&E events, current COOP information and training needs.



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Devolution of Control and Direction

Devolution is the capability to transfer statutory authority and responsibility for essential functions from an agency's primary operating staff and facilities to other employees and facilities, and to sustain that operational capability for an extended period.

VBA Central Office (VBACO) control and direction devolves to select staff at Continuity Site E when VBACO ERG members are unable to perform their duties and while in transit from VBACO to Continuity Sites B and C.

Reconstitution

Reconstitution involves restoring VBA essential functions at the current or new facility.

Directors will designate personnel to one of three tiers, based on functions and roles performed by the position, to provide a phased reconstitution effort. The following examples are provided as a reference:

<i>Tier I</i>	<i>Tier II</i>	<i>Tier III</i>
Managers	Supervisors	All other employees
Special teams	Mission essential employees	

V. Family Preparedness

As an employee of VBA, you may have the dual role of providing for your family and providing services for our Veterans. It is essential that you prepare your family in advance so that you can meet the needs of Veterans in an emergency without fearing for your family.

Emergency preparation should include:

- Learning about hazards and emergencies that may affect you and your family. Go to "[Be Informed](https://www.ready.gov)" at Ready.gov for more information on how to prepare for specific disasters and hazards.
- Identifying and understanding community warning systems.
- Developing a disaster emergency plan.
- Collecting and assembling a disaster supply kit.
- Knowing where to seek shelter from all types of hazards.



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- Practicing and maintaining your plans.

Warning Systems

Local: Ask local authorities about the methods used to warn your community.

National: The Emergency Alert System (EAS) can address the entire nation on very short notice in case of a grave threat or national emergency. Find out if your local radio and TV stations participate in the EAS.

[National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\) Weather Radio \(NWR\)](#) is a nationwide network of radio stations broadcasting continuous weather information directly from a nearby National Weather Service office to specially configured NOAA weather radio receivers. If NOAA Weather Radio is available where you live, consider purchasing a NOAA weather radio receiver.

Family Disaster Planning

If a disaster occurs in your community, local government and disaster-relief organizations will try to help you and your family, but your family should already know how to be self-sufficient for at least three days in case local responders are unable to reach them immediately.

Being prepared may mean providing your own shelter, first aid, food, water and sanitation or having an alternate living arrangement. Your property may not be available to you for long periods of time due to damage or dangerous conditions.

To prepare your family for an emergency, identify your family's essential needs and then establish a plan that addresses those needs. Your plan should be fully understood by all members of your household.

Your family's essential needs might include:

- Escape routes
- Family communication and ability to receive information
- Shelter and environmental protection (dust, insects, wind, etc.)
- Sustenance – food and water
- Medical needs/sanitation needs
- Needs of the young, the old and those with a disability within your household
- Warmth/coolness



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- Light

Create a Family Disaster Plan

Make a family disaster plan before an emergency occurs. Maintain this plan in your emergency supply kit or other secure place where you can access it in the event of a disaster.

Caring for animals

Pets are not allowed in all shelters, so you will need to identify pet shelters or make an alternate plan on how to provide for your pet's needs.

