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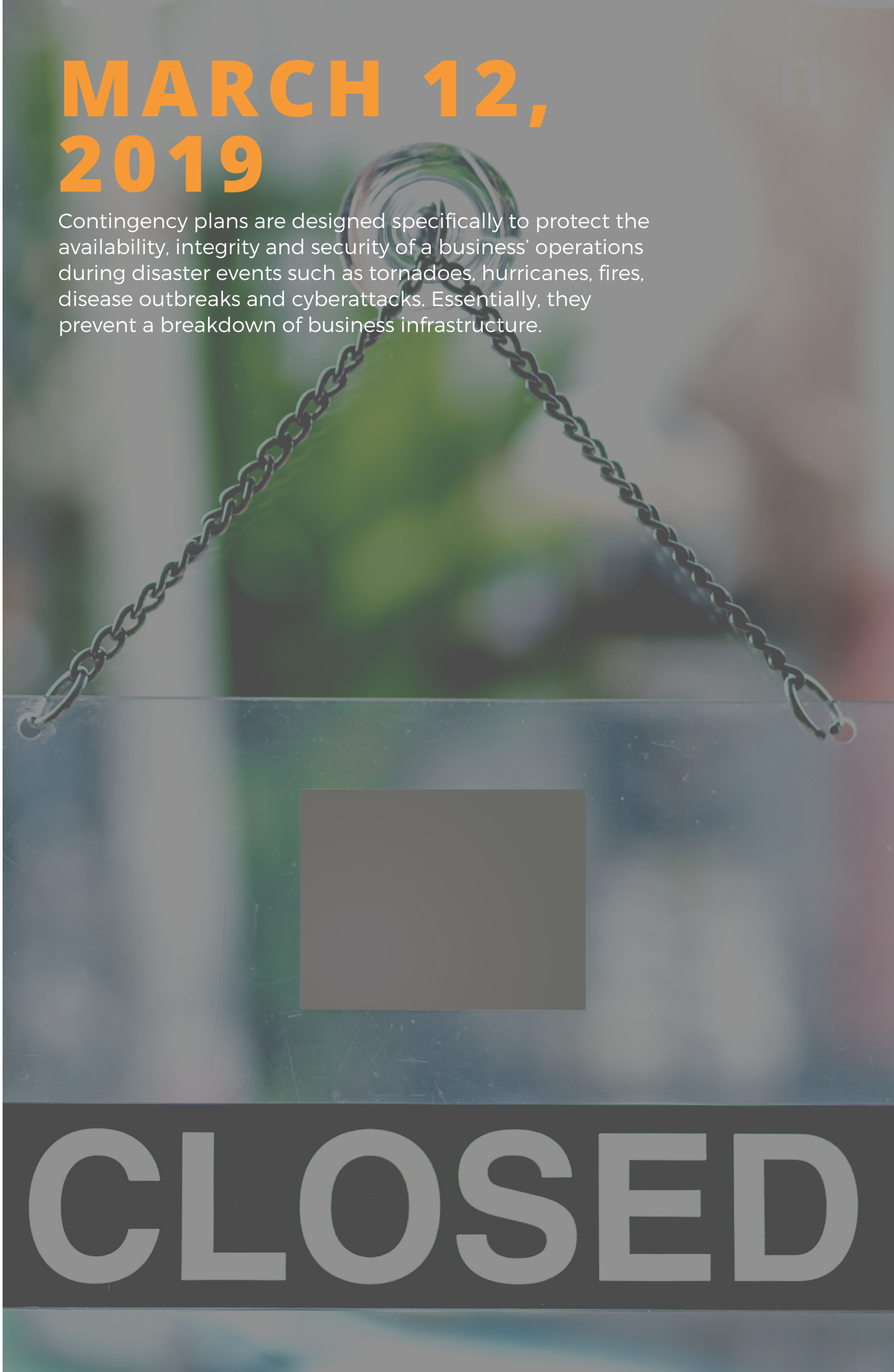

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC PLANNING FOR BUSINESSES

Being prepared for the future is one of the keys to success.

What is Coronavirus?

The coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), also known as "SARS-CoV-2," is a person-to-person spread respiratory illness, like the general flu. The novel ("novel" meaning new) coronavirus that causes the illness was discovered when an outbreak occurred in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China.

It is believed that the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) is spread through person-to-person contact. It is considered a global health risk, with the highest infection risk being person-to-person exposure.

Right now, as cases of the coronavirus are limited in the United States, it is considered low risk. A few "imported" cases though travelers to the Wuhan City region in Hubei Province, China have been reported but contained and the individual properly treated.

This prevention has ensured that the coronavirus has not spread within the U.S.

The disease has been located in 37 international locations in total and growing.

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What is Being Done to Stop the Coronavirus?

The CDC has succeeded in growing the coronavirus (COVID-19) in a clinical environment and been provided to other scientific agencies for study, as well as uploading the entire genome sequence of the virus strain to GenBank, the international scientific database of genome sequences used for research. The CDC has been able to receive the genetic material required through coronavirus cases being treated within the U.S.

Pandemic?

The words “pandemic” and “epidemic” are largely semantics, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

- “Pandemic” broken down from the root words in Greek, “pan”, meaning “everyone” and “demos,” meaning “public.” “Pandemic” is generally used when a massive population is infected with the disease, posing a worldwide risk.
- “Epidemic” broken down from the root words in Greek, “epi” meaning “above” and “demos,” meaning “public.” “Epidemic” is generally used when a massive population is infected with a disease during a short time.

How Do I Stay Safe?

- As it is currently flu season (October – March), get your flu vaccine and stay vigilant on taking flu antivirals if they have been prescribed to you.
- Look after your own health by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, practicing proper handwashing, and keeping an eye on your health physically, mentally and emotionally.

If You Work in the Healthcare Environment:

- Monitor your interactions with anyone presenting coronavirus symptoms or have recently traveled to China, particularly the Hubei Province.
- Follow proper infection prevention procedures.
- Look after your own health by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, practicing proper handwashing, and keeping an eye on your health physically, mentally and emotionally.

How Can My Business Be Prepared If the Worst Should Happen?

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, a business contingency plan allows a business or organization to quickly recover from a catastrophic event. This includes physical disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornados as well as other disasters such as disease pandemics, long-term power outages, and water backups. Boiling business contingency plans down to their essence, they are put in place to:

- Limit the damage done to property, equipment, and data or injury to staff, clients and patients.
- Ensure that an organization’s key activities go uninterrupted during a disaster incident.

What Does a Business Contingency Plan Outline?

Contingency plans are designed specifically to protect the availability, integrity and security of a business' operations during disaster events such as tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, disease outbreaks and cyberattacks. Essentially, they prevent a breakdown of business infrastructure.

Business Contingency Plan Tips

1. The plan should utilize language that is accessible by all employees.
2. Include remote work options should travel become difficult.
3. Ensure staff know basic maintenance knowledge such as where breakers and valve shutoffs are located within the building.
4. Stock up on overnight items should staff be unable to leave the building.
5. Prepare for staff shortages. Enroll key employees to stay overnight in the case of a disaster, or start a call-in list based on each employee's location.
6. Ensure gaps in the flow of communication are accounted for, should a staff member become unreachable.
7. Prepare an evacuation plan, should the need to evacuate arise.
8. Ensure all insurance coverage is up to date.
9. Create a list of all emergency contacts such as key staff members, insurance representatives, and any applicable service providers.

Develop Roles and Policies

Well-developed roles within your organization ensure all employees understand their individual parts in the business contingency plan, preventing downtime or confusion when the contingency plan must be put into place. Well-developed policies go together with well-developed roles, providing the framework to put the contingency plan in action. Ensure that all employees understand their roles and how organizational policies affect them.

Defined Roles

- Are the specific duties of each role outlined in the business contingency plan?
- Do the staff involved understand their specific duties, should the business contingency plan be activated?

Communication

- Is the flow of communication fully outlined?
- Should decisions need to be escalated, does the business contingency plan direct to who will need to make them?
- Should the disaster conditions worsen or improve, does the communication plan change? If so, is the new flow of communication documented?

Contacting Outside Service Providers

- Are services such as power, water, and IT on call in the case a piece of equipment needs to be repaired, or service restored? If they will not be available, who should be contacted?
- Are pieces of backup equipment such as power generators or emergency water pumping equipment necessary?

Maintaining Documentation

- Does the business contingency plan identify what needs to be documented, and by what staff member?
- Do appropriate members of staff know where to find the appropriate documentation to fill out?

1. Identify Priorities and Create a Timeline

The next step is to identify your organization's priorities. For example, a hospital will want to ensure power is maintained in all buildings to run essential equipment. A cloud data storage center would want to ensure their servers stay online. With priorities defined, determine a contingency plan timeline. How quickly should each priority item be restored, should they go down?

2. Identify Risks

Is your organization reliant on a core group of employees? Prone to flooding during heavy rain? In a remote area that could be cut off during a disaster scenario? Are there stipulations in the business contingency plan to account for the severity of the disaster changing for the worse? This is the time to identify key challenges that could prevent the success of a business contingency plan.

3. Create Your Contingency Plan

Once all stakeholders, issues, and problems to overcome have been identified, it is time to create the business contingency plan. While the actions written into it are incredibly important, identifying activation and deactivation stages of the business contingency plan are important as well.

Activation

- What determining factors activate the contingency plan?
- Who has the authority to activate the business contingency plan?
- How are staff notified that the business contingency plan has been activated?
- Have the staff been educated on where to find out more about the business contingency plan in the event it is activated?

Deactivation

- What are the parameters that dictate when the business contingency plan should be deactivated and normal activity to resume?

Ongoing Maintenance

An outdated business contingency plan is as good as not having one at all. Here are some tips to ensure that your contingency plan never goes out of date:

- Regularly re-examine what applications, data, hardware, and personnel are key to operations. Ensure these items stay a high priority in the contingency plan.
- Test the contingency plan periodically to judge response time, required materials, staff load, and other factors. Should flaws be found, troubleshoot them immediately and change the contingency plan accordingly.
- Integrate portions of the plan into normal business operations – should the contingency plan be needed; it will not be a shock to all employees and some of the preparation will have already been completed.

Data Back-Up Plan

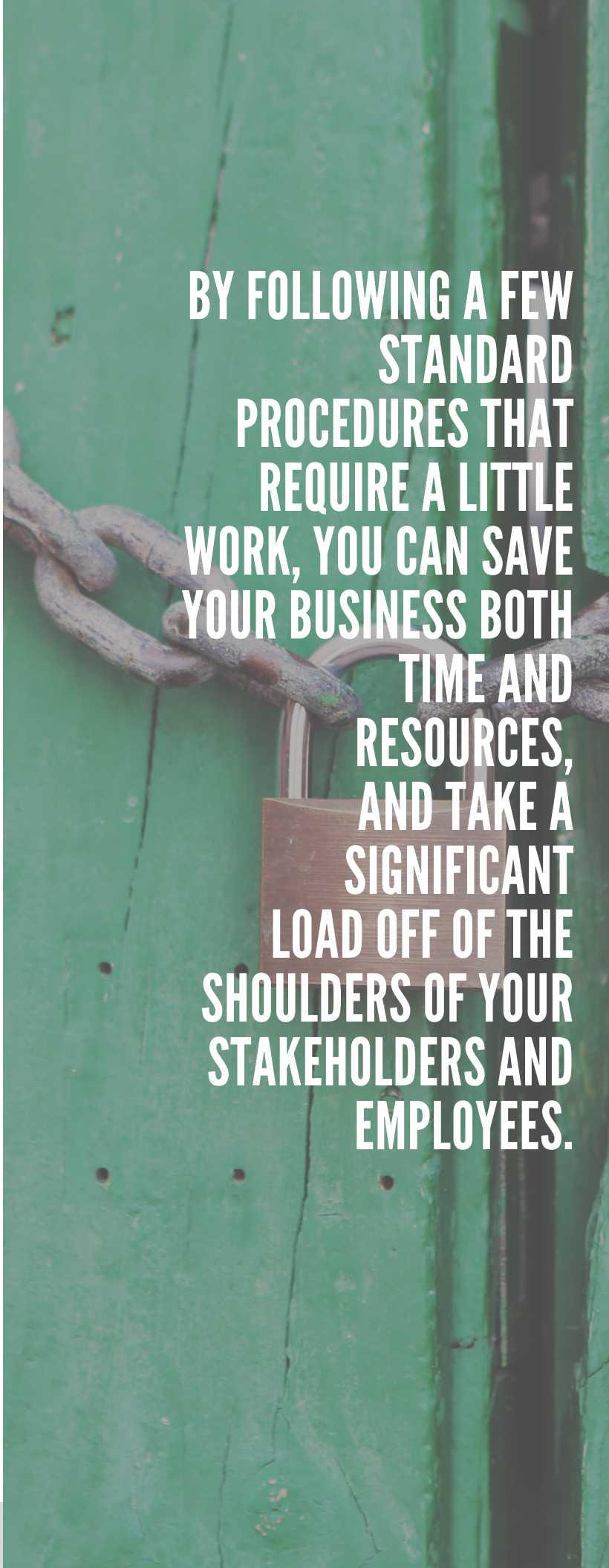
Much like paper, in the event of a disaster, it is easy for files to be lost to the abyss during an incident if they aren't properly backed up and stored away.

Backups of Backups

- Has your organization considered other methods of backup outside of in-house servers, CDs, or storage devices?
- If your organization is utilizing cloud storage, will the cloud storage provider be affected by the same disaster as well?
- Will data created during the use of the business continuity plan be successfully saved?

Data Restoration Plan

- Does the business continuity plan indicate what data will need to be restored if lost?
- If security measures such as two-factor authentication have been enabled, have all staff involved in the restoration effort been given appropriate access?
- Are manual restoration procedures included?
- Are procedures for reloading lost data documented?

Disasters Don't Have to be Disasters

Your business doesn't have to be set back or closed when outside conditions go south. By following a few standard procedures that require a little work, you can save your business both time and resources, and take a significant load off of the shoulders of your stakeholders and employees.