

ARE YOU READY?

As many of you may already know, in an effort to continue to improve helicopter education and safety nationwide, Helicopter Association International (HAI) has taken some of the popular programs from its Professional Education Series on the road to various cities around the country.

Recently, some of the HAI staff, including myself, were able to attend the “Coping With Crisis 101 — Managing an Aviation Disaster” course that was held in Alexandria, Virginia. The Facilitator/Instructor for this course is Steve Bassett. Steve is the Principal Owner and CEO of “The Communications Workshop, LLC.”

A growing number of companies have recognized the need to be prepared for a disaster or a crisis by having a program in place that can help to reduce the negative effect on the company. In many cases, it can mean the difference between being able to recover and continue in business or being forced to close the doors.

I must say that during my career in aviation, I have had exposure to a variety of programs involving the development and implementation of Crisis Management Systems. I truly believe the program put on by HAI and Steve Bassett is one of the best. You leave the class with all of the tools you need to develop and implement a comprehensive “Crisis/Disaster Management Program” that will be appropriate for all aspects of your company.

Of course, we all know you run a safe company and your flight operations logged thousands of hours without even a hint of a problem, and we certainly hope it remains that way.

It always happens to the other guy. Right? No matter how careful you are, there is still a chance you could suffer a life-altering event that could devastate you and your company.

With an ever-increasing emphasis on safety by everyone, including the media, and on terrorism and other security related issues, being prepared needs to be an essential part of your every day operational planning. As one operator who has experienced having to manage the aftermath of a fatal accident commented, “Pay attention and you will survive. Don’t prepare and eventually you will face the consequences.” Unfortunately, most aviation companies will experience a bad one sooner or later and will have ramifications to pay if not prepared.

Each year the NTSB investigates more than 1,800 aviation accidents. Those owners and operators did not think it would happen to them either. But it did. The question is — are you prepared if it happened to you? What would you do if the unexpected happens? How will you comfort the families of those injured or worse? How will you take care of your employees? How will you deal with an unsympathetic news media, relentlessly probing into every nook and cranny of your company? The list goes on and on. It’s a lot to think about and that’s only the beginning.

The program focuses on four main areas, Prevention, Preparation, Response, and Recovery. It provides you with a checklist of things to consider to help avoid a disaster, and helps you work through the

internal audit process. It is presented in a manner that outlines a series of recommended actions to be taken to set up the foundation for your program. The course is far too comprehensive to cover all aspects in a short article, but I will try to include some of the key points.

One of the first actions should be to identify and assemble a Crisis Management Planning Group. It should include, but not be limited to, a member of senior management, key supervisors, employees, Federal, State & Local Government Agencies, local fire, police and other officials, communications specialists, customers, local politicians, local news media, key contractors, legal counsel and don’t forget your insurance representatives.

The planning group needs to make the following determinations: (1) For what crisis should they be preparing? (2) How should the company respond to each crisis situation? And (3) Who will do what and when?

Next, I suggest you answer 12 very important questions: (1) Are you comfortable that you have done everything in your power to ensure that the “crisis” you have identified and prioritized, does not happen? (2) If not, what more should you be doing, and what is the time frame for doing it? (3) What more should you be doing to screen all new employee’s backgrounds, particularly pilots and maintenance personnel? (4) What more should you be doing regarding employee training and recurrent evaluations, again particularly pilots and maintenance personnel? (5) What more should you be doing to improve

your pilot, AMT, and maintenance record keeping processes? (6) If the FAA or NTSB reviewed your records today, would you be in compliance with all applicable FARs? (7) If not, what more should you be doing? (8) What improvements can you make in your “Flight Ops Decision-Making Process” to further improve safety? (9) What improvements can you make in your “Risk Analysis Go/No Go” Policies, Processes, Procedures, and Practices? (10) What steps have you taken or should you be taking to ensure there is no pressure from sales or senior management to fly when it is unsafe? (11) Are there any budget corners being cut in Operations, Pilot & AMT Training, or Aircraft Maintenance? (12) If so, what are you going to do to correct this serious problem?

Up to this point I’ve attempted to convey to you, that a well thought out “Crisis Management Plan” is, and should be, very comprehensive. Please don’t let that scare you off or, in any way, deter you from developing one that is appropriate for the size of your company.

In the remaining space I have allocated for this article, I’ll attempt to identify for you at least the majority of the topics/elements you should consider including as part of your program.

Most fatal aviation accidents happen someplace else. The company needs to be prepared to rapidly deploy key personnel to the accident scene to begin coordinating with local first responders and the FAA and NTSB and begin implementing other crisis management and victim assistance procedures. Hence the need for a “GO TEAM.”

First, you will need to determine who needs to be on the company’s “GO Team.” Yours may include individuals such as the President/CEO, a PR/Media Specialist, a liaison to the NTSB, party participants, family disaster specialists, company financial representatives, administrative support, legal counsel, insurance specialists and others that may be deemed necessary. It should go without saying that any contact list of people needs to contain all, and I

emphasize all, means and methods that can be employed to establish contact with these critical individuals.

Next should be the assignment of staff to perform several tasks that usually need to occur simultaneously, such as, prepare passenger list/manifest, serve as company party to the investigation, liaison(s) with NTSB and other investigators, serve as primary spokesperson for the company, gather company background for media information packet, medial liaison/news briefings and communications, select and arrange for off-site location for news briefings. Additional tasks for the media relations designee include gathering pertinent background information for the company spokesperson, ensuring he/she has been briefed, contacting the news media — and again the list goes on and on.

Have you reviewed and ranked the potential for an “at-facility crisis?” If you have, is the list based on a vulnerability risk audit, and what is the probability or potential financial impact of each occurring at your facility? This list should cover bomb threats, civil disorder, sabotage, workplace violence, earthquakes, fire, explosions, an at-facility fatality, flooding, government investigation, hurricanes, etc. Don’t omit the “At-Facility Crisis Avoidance Planning” which is intended to rectify at-facility problems along with the appropriate time lines for corrective action.

Seeking additional guidance from professionals, particularly in time of a crisis is never inappropriate. There are a multitude of people and organizations out there who can be a valuable asset to you such as: your insurance company/broker, legal counsel, senior management and supervisors, other key employees, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), your local FSDO, NTSB, Federal, state, and local government officials, local fire, police, and other officials, state and local political representatives and their staffs, the local news media, friends/contacts, outside communications specialists, key customers, and many others.

You may want to develop a “Media Information Packet.” For this, you

may want professional help. Again, always follow-up on all actions taken with an audit to verify the appropriateness, the degree to which implementation has taken place, and the effectiveness.

I’m going to conclude this with the old saying, “Failing to Plan is Planning to Fail.” If you have not already done so, don’t fail to register for and attend one of the upcoming “Coping With Crisis 101 - Managing an Aviation Disaster” courses. The course schedule for the remainder of 2007 is as follows: September 19, San Diego, California, October 17, Malvern, Pennsylvania and November 7 in Portland, Oregon. For additional information visit HAI’s Web site at www.rotor.com or contact HAI’s Education Coordinator Nicole Sonberg at Nicole.sonberg@rotor.com, 703-683-4646. 

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Note: A portion of the information contained in this article is material taken directly from Steve Bassett’s “Coping with Crisis 101—Managing an Aviation Disaster” handbook. It is being used with his full knowledge and approval.



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