



Agency Continuity of Operations Planning Guidance for Defining Essential Functions

Agencies have continuity of operations plans to ensure the safety of employees and minimize the disruption of services during events that can affect agency operations. Such events can include building fires, system failures and weather emergencies.

On a day-to-day basis, of course, all agency functions are important. Depending on the type of disruption, an agency may have limited resources, staff and work space. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that these resources are focused on the functions that are *most* necessary.

Continuity planning assesses and prioritizes agency business using criteria such as time sensitivity, impact on the business and citizens, and health, safety and welfare of employees and residents.

The cornerstone of an agency continuity plan is the list of essential functions—sometimes referred to as critical functions or mission essential functions. This list also serves as the basis for determining resource requirements to perform these functions such as essential staff, space needs, and vital information and systems.

Essential functions are tasks the agency performs that are time-sensitive and must be up-and-running within a specific time frame, within 12 hours or 30 days, for example. Essential functions are, in large part, based on the agency's customers and their needs. A guideline for the number of essential functions your agency should identify is between 10 and 15; however, the number and type of essential functions identified will be different from agency to agency and depends greatly on the types of services provided.

Typically, a function is considered essential if there are legal requirements defining when the task must be performed or if the task affects the health, safety, or welfare of citizens or employees.

Questions to consider when identifying essential functions:

- Does this function protect public safety?
- Does this function protect life, health, or property (e.g., custodial care within an assisted living facility or correctional facilities, etc.)?
- Will public confidence be degraded if this function is not performed?
- Will the absence of this function cause economic, legal, or administrative loss for citizens or the Commonwealth (e.g., disbursement of financial resources that ensure families can buy groceries and pay rent/mortgage, etc.)?
- Are there legal or statutory requirements that mandate the agency perform this function?

- Will the agency be fined, penalized, sanctioned, or face potential lawsuits if this function is not performed?
- Is another agency essential function dependent upon this function?
- Does this function have a pre-determined recovery time objective (RTO) (see below)?

The recovery time objective (RTO) is the time frame for when an essential function must be up and running. The RTO “tiers” are as follows:

Tier I: 0-12 Hours
Functions that must reach operational status no later than 12 hours after disruption of service.
Tier II: 13 Hours to 1 Week
Functions that must reach operational status within 13 hours to one week and be able to sustain operations for a minimum of 30 days. These functions may be dependent on the operational status of Tier I functions.
Tier III: 1 Week to 2 Weeks
Functions that are not needed until a full week following a disruption of service. Tier III functions may depend upon the status of Tier I or II functions, or may simply have less criticality in terms of their service delivery or operations.
Tier IV: 2 Weeks to 30 Days
Functions that can be postponed until all functions in Tiers I, II and III are fully operational.
Tier V: 30+ Days
Functions that can be suspended for 30 days or more.

Once the agency has identified the most essential functions and prioritized them by RTO, the next step is to identify resources needed to complete the function. Resources include essential personnel, work space, computer hardware and software, etc.

For more information on identifying and notifying essential employees in your agency, refer to the “Guidance for Designating “Essential Employees” document and [Management Directive 530.17, amended Partial and Full-Day Closings of State Offices](#).

If you would like assistance with evaluating your essential functions and necessary resources for the functions, contact the Continuity of Government Office at 717-705-5590 or RA-COG@state.pa.us.