Building a practical lone worker emergency response plan

Working alone comes with a set of risks that are different from those in a shared workspace. When there is no colleague nearby to notice a fall, call for help, or respond to an unexpected threat, the responsibility falls entirely on the individual worker and the systems they have in place. A well-thought-out emergency response checklist can make the difference between a minor incident and a serious outcome. This article outlines the key elements every lone worker should consider when preparing for an emergency, with a focus on practical steps that can be taken before and during an incident.

The first step in any lone worker safety plan is understanding the specific hazards of the work environment. A delivery driver faces different risks than a remote field technician or a night-shift retail worker. Common hazards include slips and falls, medical emergencies, aggressive behaviour from members of the public, and equipment failures. Once the hazards are identified, the next step is to decide how to respond to each one. This is where a structured checklist becomes useful, as it helps ensure nothing is overlooked.

Assess your communication options

When you work alone, your ability to call for help is your lifeline. Mobile phones are the most obvious tool, but they have limitations. Battery life, mobile coverage, and the possibility of dropping or damaging the phone all need to be considered. A dedicated **personal safety alarm** with GPS location and an SOS button can provide a more reliable alternative, especially in areas where mobile reception is weak. The alarm should be tested regularly to confirm it works and that the battery is charged. It is also worth having a backup method of communication, such as a satellite messenger or a simple whistle, for situations where electronics fail.



Set up a check-in schedule

Regular check-ins with a base contact or a monitoring service help ensure that a missing worker is noticed quickly. The schedule should match the level of risk: a worker in a high-risk environment might check in every 30 minutes, while someone in a low-risk office-like setting might check in every two hours. The check-in can be as simple as a text message, a phone call, or a push of a button on an app. If a check-in is missed, the escalation plan should kick in automatically, starting with a phone call to the worker and moving up to notifying emergency contacts or the 111 emergency service if there is no response.

What to include in a check-in

The check-in itself does not need to be complicated. A simple confirmation that the worker is safe and at their planned location is usually enough. However, for higher-risk tasks, the check-in might include a brief status report, such as "task complete" or "work in progress." The key is consistency: the contact person should know what to expect and what to do if a check-in is missed.

Create an escalation plan

An escalation plan outlines the steps to take when a lone worker does not respond to a check-in or sends an SOS alert. The plan should list who gets notified first, how they are contacted, and what they should do. For example, the first step might be a phone call to the worker. If there is no answer, the next step could be a call to a designated emergency contact. If the situation still is not resolved, the plan should specify when to call the 111 emergency service and what information to provide, such as the worker's last known location and any relevant details about the task they were performing. A good escalation plan also includes instructions for the worker's family or close contacts, so they know what to expect and how to help.

Prepare for medical emergencies

Medical emergencies, such as a heart attack, a severe allergic reaction, or a fall that causes unconsciousness, are among the most serious risks for lone workers. In these situations, the worker may not be able to call for help at all. This is where automatic fall detection and a reliable SOS button become critical. The worker should also carry basic medical information, such as allergies, blood type, and emergency contact details, in a visible place or on their person. A first aid kit should be within easy reach, and the worker should have basic first aid training. However, the most important element is a system that can alert help even when the worker cannot press a button.



Check mobile coverage and location sharing

A personal safety alarm that relies on cellular networks will only work if there is coverage at the work site. Before starting a shift, the lone worker should check the mobile coverage in their area. If the area has weak or no signal, a satellite-based device might be necessary. Location sharing is another key feature. The worker should ensure that their device shares accurate GPS coordinates with the monitoring service or emergency contacts. Some devices allow the worker to set a "safe zone" and send an alert if they leave that zone, which can be useful for tracking movements in remote areas.

Test your equipment regularly

An emergency alert device is only useful if it works when needed. Regular testing should be part of the daily or weekly routine. The worker should check the battery level, confirm that the device can connect to the network, and test the SOS button to make sure it sends an alert to the correct person or service. It is also wise to test the fall detection feature by performing a controlled drop, following the manufacturer's instructions. Any issues should be reported and fixed immediately. Do not assume that a device that worked last week will still work this week.

Review the workplace procedure

Each workplace should have a documented lone worker procedure that covers the steps above. The worker should read and understand this procedure before starting work. The procedure should include contact numbers for emergency contacts, instructions for using the personal safety alarm, and details of the check-in schedule. It should also explain what to do in specific scenarios, such as a fire, a medical emergency, or an aggressive encounter. The worker should keep a printed copy of the procedure in their vehicle or bag, as well as a digital copy on their phone.

Know your emergency contacts

Having a list of emergency contacts is essential. This list should include the direct number of the supervisor, the monitoring service (if used), the local police, and the 111 emergency service. It should also include the contact details of a nearby colleague or a family member who can be reached quickly. The worker should store these contacts in their phone and also write them down on a card that stays with them. In a panic, it is easy to forget a number, so having it visible is a simple but effective safeguard.



MERCARI

Finally, remember that a plan is only as good as the practice behind it. Run through the scenarios in your head or with a colleague. Make sure you know where the SOS button is and how to activate it. Understand what happens after you press it. A good plan removes uncertainty, so that when something goes wrong, your reaction is automatic. The goal is not to eliminate all risk but to reduce the time between an incident and the arrival of help. With a solid checklist and the right tools, lone workers can face their day with confidence.