

8 Things to Include in Your Severe Weather Policy



What's At Stake

If you're in Canada, you don't need us to explain why your organization needs a policy on work closures, absences and lateness caused by severe weather conditions. But what we can do is help you ensure that your own policy is up to snuff.

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While each policy is different, there are 8 things that any and all severe weather policies should include. ([Click here](#) for a Model Severe Weather Policy that you can adapt for your own workplace.)

1. A Clear Statement of Policy

Start your policy by laying out the two basic principles:

- **Principle 1:** Reporting to work on time each day is the fundamental obligation of every employee; and
- **Principle 2:** Employee safety is the top priority.

Severe weather conditions that make it unduly dangerous for employees to drive or travel to work, pits Principle 1 against Principle 2. In this situation, you want to make it clear that Principle 2 prevails and that employees are neither expected nor encouraged to put themselves in unreasonable danger to get to work [Policy, Sec. 2].

2. A Clear Definition of "Severe Weather"

In much of Canada, lousy weather is par for the course especially during the winter. You need to make it clear that to justify an office closure, absence or lateness, weather must be not just "inclement" or "adverse" but "severe." Define "severe weather" as conditions that cause major disruptions to transportation and/or pose a significant threat to safety. Where possible, list specific criteria about snowfall amounts and temperatures levels, e.g., snowfalls of 10 inches (25.4 cm) or more or severe cold of -15°F (-26°C) or lower. Other examples of conditions to include in the definition of "severe weather":

- Flooding affecting transportation;
- Hurricanes and damaging winds;
- Loss of heat in the winter; and
- Declarations of emergencies asking people to stay off the roads.

[Policy, Sec. 3].

3. Clarification of Which Employees the Policy Covers

Make it clear that the severe weather policy covers only employees that drive or take transportation to or for work and not to telecommuters who do 100% of their jobs remotely from home and would be presumably unaffected by the occurrence of severe weather [Policy, Sec. 4].

4. The 3 Things Employees Must Do When Not Reporting on Time Due to Severe Weather

The purpose of a severe weather policy is to let employees know when they have leeway to skip or come late to work without discipline. While you'll ultimately have to rely on employees' discretion, you should require them to at least make an effort, closely monitor weather and travel conditions and exercise good judgment in deciding whether to make the trek. And if they decide not to come or come late, they should have to do 3 things:

- Immediately notify their department head or supervisor of their decision and why they decided it was too dangerous to attempt the journey;
- Make appropriate arrangements to manage their work tasks and minimize disruption, e.g., by asking a co-worker who is at work to cover for them and keep scheduled phone appointments with clients; and
- Make up for the lost time by working late, using a vacation day (if they miss a whole or half day), using time off in lieu, working from home (if their supervisor deems it appropriate) or via other arrangements.

[Policy, Sec. 5].

5. Accommodations for Child Care Needs

Severe weather can keep home the employees who are otherwise prepared to make the trip to work by derailing their daycare or baby-sitting arrangements. So, you may want to consider adding language to your policy letting employees know that you're prepared to accommodate them by letting them bring their kids with them to work, provided that they give their supervisors notice and get their approval [Policy, Sec. 6].

6. Indication of Who's Responsible for Deciding on Office Closings

So far, we've talked about situations where the company is open for business but employees can't get to work on time due to severe weather conditions. You must also address office closures, late openings and early dismissals (which, for simplicity's sake, we'll refer to collectively as "closures"). First, be sure to list the person/department in charge of deciding on office closures and the procedures and criteria they must use in making that determination [Policy, Sec. 7.1].

7. Methods of Notifying Employees about Office Closings

Set out specific methods for notifying employees of office closures as far in advance as possible, which may include email, posting on the company website or social media page, text, phone calls or recorded messages at a dedicated number and/or a designated person to contact. Try to include at least one notification method that will remain operative during a power outage [Policy, Sec. 7.1].

8. Rules on Compensation for Time Missed Due to Severe Weather

Unless the employment contract or collective agreement specifies otherwise, you're not legally obligated to pay employees for work time missed as a result of office closings (or failure to show up on time on days when the office is open). Exception: Under provincial employment standards laws, employees who report to work at their employer's call and are dismissed early are entitled to at least the minimum reporting or "call-in" pay required by the jurisdiction's employment standards law, typically 3 hours at the employee's regular wage rate (unless overtime is due) regardless of how many hours they actually work. However, employees must actually report to work to qualify for call-in pay [Policy, Sec. 7.2].