

EMERGENCY PROCEDURES AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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NOTE: Much of what follows is distilled from professional reports on this subject. I make no claim of originality and rather emphasize that the recommendations here are from professionals in the field of emergency planning.

In emergency planning, we need to be sure that we are meeting our responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act. For example, how would we handle evacuation of an employee who uses a wheelchair if there is a fire in a building, the elevators are shut down, and the person is on the second floor? What about notifying students, faculty, or staff who are hard-of-hearing or deaf? People with low vision who may need help leaving a building? People who we know have difficulty moving quickly and/or handling stress? And what about medical emergencies in a building? Safety and fire prevention issues?

Here are some things that should help:

- Getting input from people with disabilities during the planning process
- Identifying building personnel who will be responsible for the safety of people with disabilities in case of an emergency
- Knowing how to locate people with disabilities in the building, and knowing what actions need to be taken in case of an emergency, including provision for service animals
- Knowing the accessible routes in the building
- Having methods in place to notify people who may not be able to see visual warnings or hear sound warnings.
- Providing areas of rescue assistance
- Providing emergency information in accessible formats.

Training checklist (NOTE - This checklist is also distilled from another source):

1. Training sessions that include individuals with disabilities are planned.
_____Addressed _____Not Addressed
2. Individuals with disabilities are informed of all special evacuation procedures and trained to use evacuation equipment adapted to their capabilities and limitations.
_____Addressed _____Not Addressed
3. Individuals with disabilities are included in any emergency drills.
_____Addressed _____Not Addressed
4. Campus personnel holding positions of responsibility in emergency situations have training in responding to the needs of individuals with disabilities.
_____Addressed _____Not Addressed
5. Individuals with disabilities are informed of their responsibility to become familiar with

emergency evacuation and safety procedures.
_____Addressed _____Not Addressed

Related issues checklist (also from other sources):

1. Identification of individuals with disabilities: How are persons with disabilities who may need assistance during an emergency identified?
2. Evacuation procedures when there is no emergency: Occasionally people with disabilities may need assistance in an evacuation when there is no emergency. For example, when the elevator is down, people in wheelchairs are stranded on upper floors. What is the procedure at your building?
4. Availability of equipment: Do you have equipment for evacuation, and if so, are you familiar with how to use it? Is it accessible for persons with disabilities?
5. Methods for designating individuals to assist: If evacuation is done, how are personnel to assist chosen?
6. Training for evacuation personnel: If evacuation is done, by hand-carrying non-ambulatory persons down stairwells, leading blind persons to exits, by use of equipment, etc., are personnel trained, and if so by whom?
7. Self-evacuation of persons with disabilities: Under what circumstances can persons with disabilities opt to self-evacuate? (This is most frequently an issue involving persons with mobility impairments who are partially ambulatory.)
 - a. Can self-evacuate when they request it and personnel are available to accompany them.
 - b. Can self-evacuate when it has been determined that they are capable of self-evacuating, safely. If yes, how is this determined?
 - c. Person with disability determines independently whether to self-evacuate or not.
 - d. No one can self-evacuate.
 - e. Occasion has never occurred.
 - f. Other.
8. Evacuation procedures when there is a suspected fire: Which of the following apply?
 - a. Persons in need of special procedures go to a predesignated area and wait to be evacuated.
 - b. Persons in need of special procedures use elevators to evacuate.
 - c. Other.
9. Establishment of safe/refuge area: If persons are to go to predesignated areas, how are safe/refuge areas established?
10. Dissemination of information on safe/refuge areas: Are persons with disabilities informed of safe/refuge areas and emergency procedures?
 - a. Letters to their homes each semester or year.
 - b. Special emergency procedures meetings each year.
 - c. Included in orientation programs for students with disabilities.
 - d. Included in orientation programs for employees with disabilities.

- e. Safe areas are discussed individually with people with disabilities as necessary.
- f. An access guide or other emergency procedures brochure outlining the safe areas on the campus is distributed.
- g. Displayed floor plans of emergency routes include safe areas.
- h. Safe areas have signs/stickers to visually mark them.
- i. There is no special procedure to students/staff of emergency procedures.
- j. Other.

11. Notification to emergency personnel of location of individuals with disabilities: How do emergency personnel know that a person with a disability is waiting in a safe/refuge area? How is communication maintained?

- a. Safe areas have a monitor who stays with persons with disabilities in an emergency and who facilitates communication to a central location.
- b. A list of persons with disabilities who may need evacuation assistance is prepared; the list includes, as applicable, class schedules and/or work schedules.
- c. Safe areas have phones in them with the number of security or other office.
- d. Safe areas have two-way communication via intercom or walkie-talkie.
- e. Other.

12. Equipment for communication during emergency: What equipment is available? Is it accessible for persons with communication disabilities such as deafness?

13. Emergency procedures for bomb threats: In the event of a bomb threat, are your procedures the same as those for a fire? If not, what is different? Are students and others able to tell if there is a different emergency? How?

- a. In the event of a bomb threat, different coded bells are sounded so people can determine the nature of the emergency.
- b. In the event of a bomb threat, people with mobility impairments use the elevator to evacuate in multi-story buildings.
- c. In the event of a bomb threat, people with disabilities, as necessary, go to the safe/refuge area, the same as a fire drill.
- d. In the event of a bomb threat, people with disabilities and others are evacuated, the same as in a fire.
- e. Other.

14. Procedures for other emergencies: Do you have additional procedures for people with disabilities for other types of emergencies such as chemical spills, problems with fumes, etc.?

- a. People with disabilities follow the same procedure as for a fire drill.
- b. People with disabilities follow the same procedure as for a bomb threat.
- c. There are separate procedures developed.
- d. Not applicable for my building.

15. Reports of real emergency experience: Have you ever had experience in a real emergency? If yes, what happened? What went right? What went wrong? What would have you done differently?

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Here are some excerpts from a November 2005 article - "Emergency Preparedness and Disabilities: Getting All Employees Out Safely" - published by the Society for Human Resource Management:

Developing the plan

To create an evacuation plan that covers all employees, the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) recommends asking employees whether they have limitations that will interfere with their ability to evacuate in an emergency. In a fact sheet on obtaining and using employee medical information as part of emergency planning, the EEOC says an employer has three ways of asking for information:

- After making a job offer, but before employment begins, an employer may ask all individuals whether they need assistance during an emergency.*
- An employer may survey all current employees to determine whether they will require assistance in an emergency, as long as the employer makes it clear that self-identification is voluntary and explains the purpose for requesting the information.*
- An employer may ask employees with known disabilities if they will require assistance in the event of an emergency. An employer should not assume, however, that everyone with an obvious disability would need assistance.*

Although the ADA requires employers to keep medical information confidential, first aid and safety personnel may be informed in an emergency, when necessary. Evacuation drills can help employers discover needs that even employees might not know exist.

... some employers face a dilemma when trying to set up the best disaster plans for all employees. Although commission rules allow an employer to share information about the type of assistance an individual needs in an evacuation, requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act make employers sensitive about protecting confidentiality of employee's medical information.

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In an April 2005 report on including people with disabilities in disaster planning, the National Council on Disabilities points out: "The term disability does not apply just to people whose disabilities are noticeable, such as wheelchair users and people who are blind or deaf. The term also applies to people with heart disease, emotional or psychiatric conditions, arthritis, significant allergies, asthma, multiple chemical sensitivities, respiratory conditions, and some visual, hearing, and cognitive disabilities."

One of the benefits of holding practice evacuation is that both employers and employees may identify potential evacuation problems and take steps to fix them before real emergencies arise.

Edwina Juillet, co-founder of the National Taskforce on Fire/Life Safety for People with Disabilities, said the Food and Drug Administration, for example, has run a series of mock evacuations. During these run-throughs, she discovered a number of employees who may need additional help in an evacuation.

She said regular evacuation drills can help identify employees with hidden disabilities.

Once companies understand employee's evacuation needs, they can set up accommodations. For example:

- Emergency alarms and signs that signal emergency exit routes.
- "Buddy" systems that help employees locate and assist each other.
- Designated areas of rescue assistance.

Lessons from Hurricane Katrina: Going Beyond the Law

At the EEOC meeting, Daniel Sutherland, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, spoke about the large numbers of people with disabilities who were left behind in the Gulf Coast region.

He said 25 percent of people in Biloxi, Miss.; 24 percent in Mobile, Ala.; and 21 percent in New Orleans had disabilities prior to the storm. He added that when people in shelters were asked why they did not evacuate before Hurricane Katrina hit the region, 22 percent said they were physically unable and 23 percent said they had to care for someone who was unable to leave.

EEOC Commissioner Stuart Ishimaru asked Sutherland whether the responsibility of employers extended beyond the workplaces. Once employees were out of the building, should an employer make sure they can get to a safe place?

Sutherland replied that the legal obligation for an employer did not extend "beyond the sidewalk" of the workplace, but employers might want to consider questions of how they could get people beyond the immediate problem area and then communicate with them once the disaster is over.

Making Your Workplace Disaster Plan Work

- *Have top-level management support.*
- *Involve key stakeholders—work with first responders directly.*
- *Realize needs related to each office space are different.*
- *Make sure it's clear who has responsibility within a building.*
- *Don't rely on a single buddy system.*
- *Individualize equipment.*
- *Communication should be redundant.*
- *Reconsider the use of elevators—plans may include vertical and horizontal evacuations.*
- *Emphasize practice and drills.*

Source: Office of Disability Employment Policy, Department of Labor

Resources

The Job Accommodation Network, a free consulting service of the U.S. Department of Labor's [Office of Disability Employment Policy](http://www.jan.wvu.edu). <http://www.jan.wvu.edu>. 1-800-526-7234, Accommodations; 1-800-232-9675, ADA Information. jan@jan.wvu.edu

[Employers' Guide to Including Employees with Disabilities in Emergency Evacuation Plans](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/emergency.html), <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/emergency.html>.

[Preparing the Workplace for Everyone, Accounting for the Needs of People with Disabilities](#), published by the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness in the Workplace of the Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities. July 2005. Copies available from the United States Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (www.dol.gov/odep)

Fact Sheet on **[Obtaining and Using Employee Medical Information as Part of Emergency Evacuation Procedures](http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/evacuation.html)**, www.eeoc.gov/facts/evacuation.html

[Disability Resource Center](http://www.dhs.gov/disabilitypreparedness), <http://www.dhs.gov/disabilitypreparedness>,

[Saving Lives, Including People with Disabilities in Emergency Planning](http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/pdf/saving_lives.pdf), April 2005, National Council on Disability, http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/pdf/saving_lives.pdf