

Evacuating the Special Needs Population

Barriers to Evacuation

Activity limitations, whether permanent or temporary, can interfere with or prevent successful evacuation. In addition, not knowing what to do or where to go during an emergency can be a substantial barrier.

People with special needs may face many different forms of potential barriers including:

- **Physical barriers**, which restrict the ability to get to, into, around, and out of facilities. Physical barriers might include curbs, steps, stairways, narrow doorways and aisles; and inability to use mobility devices (canes, walkers, wheelchairs).
- **Communication barriers**, which restrict access to signs, exit routes, lighting, sirens and alarms, public address systems, and communication devices (phones, walkie-talkies).
- **Cognitive, learning, and emotional barriers**, which restrict the ability to remain calm, problem solve, make quick decisions, and cope during an emergency.
- **Program barriers**, which restrict access to and participation in emergency and evacuation planning.
- **Transportation barriers**, which restrict access to appropriate, reliable, and accessible transportation, both public and private.

Additional Barriers: Security Measures

Security measures put in place following a disaster can create barriers for people with special needs by:

- Blocking areas, which prevents travel through or around a building or neighborhood.
- Separating a person from his/her assistive device (wheelchair/cane), medical device (oxygen), or service animal.
- Requiring a person with limited mobility to stand for a wand examination.

Additional Barriers: Change in Conditions

Unexpected changes in emergency conditions may create additional evacuation barriers for special needs populations. Examples include:

- Depletion of food, water, or medicine, requiring emergency rescue and evacuation.
- Worsening of other emergency conditions or weather.
- Failure of personal or institutional evacuation plans.

When these situations occur, state and federal assistance may be required.

Evacuation Planning

For the special needs population, emergency plans should answer the question: How will people with mobility limitations, sensory limitations, and cognitive or learning disabilities quickly evacuate during emergencies?

Planning Strategy for Evacuation

A planning strategy for evacuation should emphasize the abilities of special needs populations and recognize challenges and barriers to evacuation. The strategy should also address the requirements for accessibility. To devise a planning strategy:

- Identify who within your school may need assistance with evacuation.
- Identify the different types of special needs that impact evacuation.
- Recognize that people with special needs know best what type of assistance is needed and how it may be provided during an evacuation.
- Provide alternatives and flexibility in evacuation.

- Involve special needs support systems and people with special needs in the planning process.
- Plan reception points that can care for evacuees, including those with special needs.

Evacuation Plans at All Levels

Evacuation plans should exist at personal, organizational, workplace, and community levels and should address:

- Notification of evacuations.
- Identification of persons requiring evacuation assistance.
- Barriers to evacuation.
- Regular practice and drills.
- Evacuation options and procedures.
- Post-evacuation issues, such as transfer trauma.

Notification of Evacuations

In order to take action, all students and staff need to know that a hazard is imminent or occurring. People with special needs may require more time to evacuate. The earlier the notification, the better the chances of a successful evacuation.

Schools should work with the special needs support system to ensure that emergency plans include accessible mode of communication for notifying special needs populations of an evacuation.

Identification of People Who May Need Assistance

People who may need special assistance in an evacuation need to be identified and involved in all aspects of evacuation planning. Each person should be consulted about their specific needs and how best to provide assistance.

It is important to assess capabilities, limitations, and needs and to determine what type of evacuation assistance will be required in an emergency.

Self-assessment tools can be used not only to help identify who may need assistance during an evacuation, but also to assess preparedness. Encourage individuals and organizations to become prepared and partner with emergency management to develop evacuation plans.

Evacuation Assistance

Individuals with obvious mobility disabilities come immediately to mind as possibly needing assistance during an evacuation. There may also be people who may need assistance that have less obvious conditions, such as cognitive, learning, developmental, or medical disabilities. Temporary conditions, such as a medical condition or pregnancy, may also create limitations that require assistance.

Whether a special need is permanent or temporary, each person should be consulted about their specific needs and how best to provide assistance.

No Federal standards exist for evacuation devices. Disability advocates and emergency professional organizations can assist with research on product requirements, specifications, and availability.

Evacuation Procedures

Evacuation procedures, which outline the rapid exit from a building and evacuation from an area, are important components of an evacuation plan for the special needs population.

Emergency evacuation devices can assist in the transport of persons with special needs down stairways and out of buildings that may be under threat of a hazard. Evacuation devices have been credited with saving lives during the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Currently, there are no uniform standards for such emergency evacuation devices. It's important to include persons with special needs in the selection of these devices.

Transfer Trauma

Evacuations can be confusing and disorientating for everyone. A person who is already feeling vulnerable due to health, sensory, mobility, and cognitive changes may be at risk of experiencing transfer trauma during and after an evacuation.

Transfer trauma is more likely to occur with the elderly, people with medical conditions, and people with mental illnesses.

You can support people with special needs by providing verbal reassurance and information to help orient them to new surroundings. Make sure physical needs are addressed and medical assistance is provided, as needed. As early as possible, reconnect persons with special needs to family and other support systems.

Returning Home After the Evacuation

Evacuation plans need to go beyond evacuating from a building and address how students and staff with special needs will get home. The emergency may impact local transportation systems, cause roads to close, or make maneuvering roads and sidewalks difficult.

Regular Practice and Drills

Practicing evacuation plans and procedures is very important and should include disability issues. Practice increases skill and instills confidence in the ability to cope during an evacuation. Practice and drills should be coordinated with local fire, law enforcement, and emergency managers.

Practice and drills consist of the following types of activities:

- Walk through procedures
- Announced drills
- Surprise drills

Walk Through Procedures

Walk through procedures allow for the practice of separate parts of an evacuation plan. In this way, it is possible to concentrate efforts on particular individuals or aspects of an evacuation that may require more extensive practice.

Walk through procedures can be used to practice evacuation techniques, methods of transferring in and out of evacuation devices, carrying techniques, use of evacuation devices, and use of two-way communication systems in areas of rescue. It is critical that persons with special needs and members of emergency response teams (e.g., fire wardens) be involved in this practice.

Role-playing can be very helpful. Make sure to practice with special needs populations, service animals, and support networks. It's important to know how to:

- Report safety hazards.
- Familiarize service animals with emergency situations and provide them with an opportunity to function in different situations.
- Get to all the exits.
- Use evacuation devices and operate disability-related equipment in an emergency. For example, how to:
 - Disengage the gears of a power wheelchair.
 - Communicate important information through gestures to people who are deaf.
 - Guide people with low vision or blindness.

Announced Drills

It's a good idea to hold announced drills as often as necessary to maintain preparedness. After each drill, gather participants to evaluate the effectiveness of the drill. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the plan and work to improve it.

Announced drills are also a good time to practice:

- Communicating emergency information to people with vision and hearing loss,
- Coping with different scenarios and unforeseen situations, such as blocked paths or exits.

Surprise Drills

Surprise drills/exercises are not recommended and can lead to accidents and injuries.

Save the surprises for the real emergency. Make your drills/exercises a learning opportunity.

Outcome of Practice and Drills

Use these drills as an evaluation tool. It is only through the inclusion of disability-related issues in evacuation planning, training, and exercises that there will truly be preparedness for all.