



## **Emergency Planning for People with Disabilities and Other Special Needs**

*by*  
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When a hurricane threatened the southeast coast of the United States a few years ago, emergency evacuation transportation was dispatched for residents of a coastal community. When the bus arrived, the driver found a group of individuals with physical disabilities who needed a lift equipped bus in order to board. As a result, the operator left the group at the side of the road, to wait for “suitable transportation”. Fortunately, this case was not life threatening – but it highlights an important message for Local Emergency Planning Committees: it is essential to ensure that your emergency response plan considers persons with disabilities and other special needs. It is apparent that in almost all communities, the consideration of persons with “special needs” has not been included in the ongoing discussions of how to shelter and evacuate in the event of emergencies, particularly emergencies that involve chemical accidents and other man made environmental threats.

During the attack on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, it was painfully obvious that most organizations are ill prepared to provide the needed support for employees and other users of their facilities. Stories emerged of how people with disabilities attempted to evacuate from the buildings. In some cases, extraordinary acts of heroism have been described of attempts to assist people with disabilities, but in other cases no options were available.

### **Who are people with “special needs”?**

People with special needs include a wide variety of individuals who are identified by a variety of

names – people who use wheel chairs, people who are blind or visually impaired, people who are deaf or severely hard of hearing, people with severe emotional impairments, people with severe intellectual impairments, people with medically related needs such as diabetics, individuals with seizure disorders, and many others who require unique assistance. Individuals with disabilities are defined as persons who have physical or mental impairments that limit major life activities, have an ongoing or chronic condition, or even if they don't have such a condition, are regarded by the community as being disabled. And this doesn't necessarily include the ever-enlarging group of senior citizens who have a greater number of special needs, including Alzheimer's and related memory disorders.

In addition, in recent years we have started to consider the special needs of large numbers of individuals who do not speak or understand English. When you start to consider the number of people who may have special needs, it may at first seem overwhelming to try to include these individuals in your emergency planning.

The purpose of this article is to identify the issues related to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the emergency planning process; to identify the information and support needs of individuals with disabilities; and to discuss options for inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the planning process.

***People with disabilities --***

***are not currently included in emergency planning and little, if any, communication exists between planners and the disability community***

***have a wide variety of communication, support and health needs that differentiate them from persons without disabilities***

***tend to live in low income areas that include areas at higher risk for chemical emergencies***

**What are the requirements to serve people with disabilities?**

Many emergency planners are quite familiar with the Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act (EPCRA) that sets up notification procedures for the public and trains local emergency response and medical workers to respond to chemical emergencies. The other major Federal legislation that impacts on services to individuals with disabilities is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities, forbids exclusion from services or activities available to the general public, and requires equal access. Both these Federal laws need to be taken into consideration when developing emergency planning.

The ADA provides for a series of steps that can be taken by individuals with disabilities who feel they have been discriminated against because of their disabilities and have not been provided access to services – including services of the LEPC/SERC. A person with a disability may file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), which is followed by an investigation, mediation, litigation or a DOJ or individual suit. The result is a compliance agreement, and possible fines and penalties, which may be assessed.

While currently there are no direct rulings on local emergency planning organization activities, there have been a series of specific requirements for how 911 and telephone emergency services are provided to people with disabilities.

***The ADA protects against discrimination ...***

- Civil rights protection
- Guarantees equal opportunity in employment, public accommodations, transportation, State and local government services (regardless of size), and telecommunications

## **What Can Local Emergency Planners Do?**

There are a few things that local emergency planning agencies can do in order to ensure that individuals with disabilities are included in the planning process. Most of these suggestions are

simple and easy to integrate into the existing planning.

***Suggestion #1: Include people with disabilities in the planning process***

There are literally hundreds of organizations in the United States that are comprised of people with disabilities who are advocates for themselves and their organization. Almost any of the organizations like the Centers for Independent Living, the Mayor's or Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, the State councils on Developmental Disabilities, or the National Organization on Disabilities, would be able to assist you in locating appropriate individuals to participate in your planning process. The National Rehabilitation Information Center (NARIC) has a web site ([www.naric.com](http://www.naric.com)) and a toll free number (800.346.2742) that can provide a wide range of contacts.

Once you have identified individuals with disabilities, make sure that your meeting facilities are accessible, and that accommodations are available (like sign language interpreters, electronic copies of handouts, special transportation, accessible restrooms, and locations for individuals to use personal assistive computer equipment). It is not possible to provide accessibility for all contingencies, so try to ask the participant(s) beforehand what support they will need. In most cases, an individual with a disability already has their own supports in place, and you may not need to make any accommodations; providing accommodation may be as simple as removing a chair or relocating a table so a person who uses a wheelchair can participate.

It is a good idea to select representatives who may be able to represent the interests of people who have more than one disability, as there are many organizations that focus on disabilities in general, not specifically on one disabling condition.

***Suggestion #2: Include disability specific procedures***

For most communities, local and state emergency plans have been completed. Your first step is to review the existing plan and how it addresses the special needs of people with disabilities. This review should include members of the committee who have disabilities. They will suggest what accommodations are necessary and what is the most direct and effective way to ensure appropriate services. If you can arrange it, draft a set of proposed changes and disseminate them to a broader audience of individuals with disabilities in your community for their comments. People with disabilities live with accessibility issues every day, and have developed some easy and cost effective ways of making sure they have access.

**Suggestion #3:    *Train response personnel***

Training response personnel on how to assist individuals with disabilities during emergencies is the key to success. A few simple principles will make everyone feel more at ease (both response personnel and individuals with disabilities) if emergency procedures are needed. When providing this training, it is extremely valuable to use individuals with disabilities as trainers, as they have concrete, practical knowledge. Individuals with disabilities don't always agree on the right way to provide accessibility services, so be prepared for some debate; stay focused on finding solutions.

There are very few materials available to use for information and training purposes, but the Red Cross (1998) has developed some materials on natural disaster sheltering and evacuation, and the *Emergency Planning for People with Disabilities and Other Special Needs* (Inclusion Incorporated, 1999) offer's assistance in training personnel to deal with issues such as:

- Transporting
- Lifting or carrying people with disabilities
- Assistance animals
- Communication
- Dealing with highly emotional people & appropriate language

**Suggestion #4:    *Provide pro-active information***

Like everyone else, getting information prior to an emergency offers one of the most cost effective and useful alternatives for ensuring the safety of the community. The major problem is that almost all information is limited to print materials or broadcast on the radio or TV. It is most important to remember that people with special needs can't always hear the radio or TV, see printed materials, or understand them if they can see them. Materials need to be prepared in alternative formats such as large print, Braille, audio tapes, or in formats now available for people to use on their home computer with an assistive device like a text to speech device. You should be able to secure the assistance of existing disability organizations and their in-house publications to distribute materials even more effectively – because they know where people with disabilities live. Share the materials you developed with other LEPC's.

**Suggestion #5: Create a special needs listing**

Finally, involve disability organizations in developing a listing of individuals with special needs in your community, including people who live independently, live with their family, in group homes, in assisted living, and others types of alternative living arrangements. When you start looking around, there are a lot more people with disabilities living in your community than you think. And guess what, because people with disabilities tend to have less income, you will find a higher concentration in lower income housing areas – typically the same areas as industry, chemical plants and other hazardous facilities.

Work with local disability organizations in identifying where individuals with disabilities live – and work with families, caregivers, friends or advocates to identify the most critical needs, especially communication options. Locations and communication needs could easily and inexpensively be included in an existing locator database or be developed using commercially available software.

## Resources

American Red Cross, *Disaster preparedness for people with disabilities*, Disaster Services, American Red Cross, Washington, DC, 1998

<http://www.redcross.org/disaster/safety> (series of tips for persons with disabilities and special health care needs to improve emergency preparedness for earthquakes)

National Council on Independent Living, 1916 Wilson Blvd., Suite 209 Arlington, VA 22201, (703) 525-3406, TTY: (703) 525-4153, Fax: (703) 525-3409, e-mail: [ncil@ncil.org](mailto:ncil@ncil.org)

*Disability Preparedness Center, Washington, DC. [www,disabilitypreparedness.org](http://www.disabilitypreparedness.org) .*



### **About the Author**

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