

Preparing for Visitors with Disabilities during an Emergency

Your current emergency preparedness plan may take into account the needs of your current employees and regular contractors, but how can you ensure that a person who has never been to your office knows what to do during an emergency? How do you plan for someone you don't even know? The solution becomes even more complicated when you consider that the visitor has no knowledge of his or her surroundings and may also have a significant disability. How can you be sure that visitors will receive the information and assistance they need to safely evacuate a building or shelter-in-place during an emergency?

Considerations

- Ensure that all employees are familiar with the established evacuation routes and shelter-in-place procedures.
- Make certain all employees are familiar with the types of disabilities they may encounter and any assistance that may be required.
- Instruct all staff to take responsibility for their visitors. In the event of an actual emergency or a practice drill, a staff person should be responsible for escorting visitors. When appropriate, staff hosting an event or meeting should explain the established evacuation procedures and identify emergency egress locations.
- Encourage participation in all drills so staff can demonstrate their ability to implement the approved evacuation practices – the role of “visitor” should be a role played as part of the drill.
- Office Emergency Response Team, security personnel, supervisors and staff members should be trained on the use of evacuation chairs or any assistive devices that may be on hand or required for evacuation.
- Methods for requesting assistance must be easily available and intuitive. This could involve clearly marked call boxes, posted signs or uniformed office emergency personnel.
- Office Emergency Response Team and security personnel should be ready to assist any person who does not know the proper procedure for evacuation or needs additional assistance.
- Consider providing visitors and customers with an easily accessible copy of the plans and exit routes. These could be placed in public areas, printed on visitor badges or be prepared as “tip sheets” to be given to all visitors entering a building.
- Ensure there are multiple means of conveying timely information to both employees and visitors with disabilities, including visually impaired and deaf or hard of hearing individuals. Keep in mind that interpreters, translators, assistive listening devices, Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), as well as other aids or services may not be available during an emergency or drill.

Critical Questions

- Does the agency have an established policy for visitors who may need to access a shelter during a shelter-in-place incident or drill? Does this policy include locating the appropriate shelter location?
- If a drill or emergency took place while a visitor was unescorted, could that person find out what was happening if they had a sensory disability?
- If a drill or emergency took place while a visitor was unescorted, could that person find a safe way out of the building if they had a mobility disability?
- Are visitors clearly identifiable so that agency staff knows that they would need assistance during an emergency?
- Are there Office Emergency Response Team Members assigned to floors where there are no individuals with self-identified assistance needs?
- Have supervisors been made aware that a new workplace emergency preparedness protocol pertaining to visitors has been established?
- For meetings with significant numbers of attendees are emergency preparedness plans discussed with the main body at the meeting? Does this discussion include considerations for individuals with disabilities?