

Emergency Preparedness

For the millions of Americans who have physical, medical, sensory or cognitive disabilities, emergencies such as fires, floods and acts of terrorism present a real challenge. The same challenge also applies to the elderly and other special needs populations. Protecting yourself and your family when disaster strikes requires planning ahead. Discuss these ideas with your family, friends and/or your personal care attendant, or anyone else in your support network and prepare an emergency plan. Post the plan where everyone will see it, keep a copy with you and make sure everyone involved in your plan has a copy.

Resource links:

State of New Jersey Emergency Management Resources

<https://nj.gov/njoem/plan-prepare/access-functional-needs.shtml>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/emergencypreparedness.html>

Performing Arts Readiness Guide

<https://performingartsreadiness.org/>

New Jersey Cultural Alliance for Response (NJCAR)

<https://njculturalalliance.wixsite.com/njcar>

Sample Emergency Preparedness Plan with provisions for Individuals with Disabilities:

General Evacuation Procedures for The Growing Stage Theatre (Used with permission).

It is not always necessary to evacuate a building during an emergency. A power outage, for instance, does not necessarily call for evacuation of a building. The overall safety of the building must first be evaluated: lighting, hazardous materials, ventilation systems, and other hazardous operations. If the building can be safely occupied, evacuation is not necessary.

If evacuation is ordered, follow these procedures:

- Stay calm, do not rush, and do not panic.
- Safely stop your work.
- Gather your personal belongings if it is safe to do so. (Reminder: take prescription medications out with you if at all possible; it may be hours before you are allowed back in the building.)

- If safe, close your office door and window, but do not lock them.
- Use the nearest safe stairs and proceed to the nearest exit. Do not use the elevator.
- Proceed to the designated Emergency Assembly Area (EAA) located at the gazebo across the street from the theatre.
- Wait for any instructions from emergency responders.
- Do not re-enter the building or work area until you have been instructed to do so by the emergency responders.

Evacuation Procedures for People with Disabilities

After an evacuation has been ordered:

- People with disabilities will often need assistance to evacuate.
- DO NOT use elevators, unless authorized to do so by police or fire personnel. Elevators could fail during a fire or major earthquake.
- If the situation is life threatening, call 9-1-1.
- Check on people with mobility disabilities during an evacuation.
- Attempt a rescue evacuation ONLY if you have had rescue training or the person is in immediate danger and cannot wait for professional assistance.
- Always ASK someone with a disability how you can help BEFORE attempting any rescue technique or giving assistance. Ask how he or she can best be assisted or moved, and whether there are any special considerations or items that need to come with the person.
- The individual with the disability is the best expert in his or her disability, so ask that individual for advice before lifting or moving that person.
- Take extra time when communicating with people who are deaf, hearing impaired, or speech impaired.
- Never separate a disabled person from his or her assistive aids: wheelchairs, canes, hearing aids, medications, special diet food, urinary supplies, etc.
- A disabled person's equipment may not be working after a disaster occurs, or it may be insufficient for emergency circumstances.
- A service animal, usually a dog, is an assistive aid used by some blind, deaf and mobility impaired people. A disaster may temporarily confuse service animals and they may not be able to help their owners as effectively as before the disaster.
- Some individuals with emotional and developmental disabilities may be too unsettled to respond appropriately to instructions and directions, such as a public address announcement to evacuate a building. Some disabled individuals may need to be in a quiet place for a while to regain their composure; others may even try to hide from rescue workers.
- Some individuals with significant mental or learning disabilities might not understand the significance of "Keep Out" signs and barricade tape.

Response To Emergencies

Blindness or Visual Impairment

Bomb Threat, Earthquake, Fire, Hazardous Materials Releases, and Power Outages:

- Give verbal instructions to advise about safest route or direction using compass directions, estimated distances, and directional terms.
- DO NOT grasp a visually impaired person's arm. Ask if he or she would like to hold onto your arm as you exit, especially if there is debris or a crowd.
- Give other verbal instructions or information (i.e. elevators cannot be used).

Deafness or Hearing Loss

Bomb threat, Earthquake, Fire, Hazardous Materials Releases, and Power Outages:

- Get the attention of a person with a hearing disability by touch and eye contact. Clearly state the problem. Gestures and pointing are helpful, but be prepared to write a brief statement if the person does not seem to understand.
- Offer visual instructions to advise of safest route or direction by pointing toward exits or evacuation maps.

Mobility Impairment

Bomb Threat, Earthquake, Fire, and Hazardous Materials Releases:

- It may be necessary to help clear the exit route of debris (if possible) so that the person with a disability can move out or to a safer area.
- If people with mobility impairments cannot exit, they should move to a safer area, e.g. most upper floors have a Designated Waiting Area to wait for assistance from first responders.
- Most enclosed stairwells
- An office with the door shut with is a good distance from the hazard (and away from falling debris in the case of earthquakes)
- Notify police or fire personnel immediately about any people remaining in the building and their locations
- Police or fire personnel will decide whether people are safe where they are, and will evacuate them as necessary. The Fire Department may determine that it is safe to override the rule against using elevators

Evacuating Persons with Wheelchairs

- 1. Discuss with the user of the wheelchair how to lift the user and the wheelchair either together or separately. When circumstances necessitate separating the user and the wheelchair, keep the period of separation to a minimum.**
 - 2. Some parts of a wheelchair are safe to lift from, others will come off when lifted. Always ask the user to confirm where it is safe to lift. Also, ask the user what else about his or her wheelchair you should know in order to lift it safely.**
 - 3. Wheelchairs with four wheels (not three-wheeled scooters) usually have handbrakes on each side of the chair. When the wheelchair is to remain stationary, set both brakes.**
 - 4. When more than one flight of stairs is traversed, helpers may need to switch positions since one person may be doing most of the lifting. Switch positions only on a level landing.**
 - 5. When the lifting is complete, follow the instructions of the chair's user and restore the manual or motorized wheelchair to full operation; then direct the user to a safe area.**
 - 6. Evacuating a disabled or injured person yourself is the last resort. Consider your options and the risks of injuring yourself and others in an evacuation attempt. Do not make an emergency situation worse. Evacuation is difficult and uncomfortable for both the rescuers and people being assisted. Some people have conditions that can be aggravated or triggered if they are moved incorrectly. Remember that environmental conditions (smoke, debris, loss of electricity) will complicate evacuation efforts.**
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 - Power Outages
 - If an outage occurs during the day and people with disabilities choose to wait in the building for electricity to be restored, they can move near a window where there is natural light and access to a working telephone. During regular building hours, Building Coordinators should be notified so they can advise emergency personnel.
 - If people would like to leave and an evacuation has been ordered, or if the outage occurs at night, call 9-1-1 to request evacuation assistance from the Fire Department.
 - The following guidelines are general and may not apply in every circumstance.
 - Occupants should be invited to volunteer ahead of time to assist disabled people in an emergency. If volunteers are not available, designate someone to assist who is willing to accept the responsibility.
 - DO NOT evacuate disabled people in their wheelchairs. This is standard practice to ensure the safety of disabled people and volunteers. Wheelchairs will be evacuated later if possible.

- Always ASK disabled people how you can help BEFORE attempting any rescue technique or giving assistance. Ask how they can best be assisted or moved, and if there are any special considerations or items that need to come with them.
- Before attempting an evacuation, volunteers and the people being assisted should discuss how any lifting will be done and where they are going.
- Proper lifting techniques (e.g. bending the knees, keeping the back straight, holding the person close before lifting, and using leg muscles to lift) should be used to avoid injury to rescuer's backs. Ask permission of the evacuee if an evacuation chair or similar device is being considered as an aid in an evacuation. When using such devices, make sure the person is secured properly. Be careful on stairs and rest at landings if necessary.
- Certain lifts may need to be modified depending on the disabilities of the people.
- Summary

Prepare occupants in your building ahead of time for emergency evacuations. Know your building occupants. Train staff, faculty, and students to be aware of the needs of people with disabilities and to know how to offer assistance. Hold evacuation drills in which occupants participate, and evaluate drills to identify areas that need improvement. Plans must cover regular working hours, after hours, and weekends.

Everyone needs to take responsibility for preparing for emergencies.