

Assisting People with Disabilities During a Disaster

People with disabilities who are self-sufficient under normal circumstances may have to rely on the help of others during a disaster. Being prepared can reduce the fear, panic and inconvenience that emergencies create. The following tips can be used to assist people with disabilities during emergencies and disasters.

Examples of the Needs Disabled People Have

People with disabilities often need special assistance or more time during emergencies and disasters. Here are examples of disabilities and the kind of assistance people with these conditions may need:

- People with disabilities and the elderly often need more time than others to make necessary preparations in an emergency.
- People who are deaf or hard of hearing may not receive early disaster warnings and emergency instructions transmitted by sirens, television and radio announcements. They may need somebody to relay the information to them.
- People who are blind or visually impaired, especially older people, may be extremely reluctant to leave familiar surroundings when the request for evacuation comes from a stranger.
- A guide dog could become confused or disoriented in a disaster. People who are blind or partially sighted may have to depend on others to lead them, as well as their dog, to safety during a disaster. In most states, guide dogs are allowed to stay in emergency shelters with owners.
- People with impaired mobility are often concerned about being dropped when they are lifted or carried. Learn the proper way to transfer or move someone in a wheelchair and which exit routes from buildings are best.
- People with cognitive or learning disabilities may be unable to understand the emergency and, as a result, may become disoriented or confused about the proper way to react.
- Many respiratory, lung and breathing illnesses can be aggravated by stress. In an emergency, oxygen and respiratory equipment may not be readily available.
- People with epilepsy, Parkinson's disease and other conditions often have very individualized medication schedules that cannot be interrupted without serious consequences. Some patients may be unable to communicate this information during an emergency.

Preparing for a Disaster

During a disaster ordinary items in the home can cause injury or damage. Anything that can move, fall, break or cause a fire is a potential hazard. Check for items such as bookcases, hanging pictures or overhead lights that could fall during an earthquake.

Have a plan for getting people with disabilities out of their homes or places of work. Plan two evacuation routes because some exits or roads may be closed or blocked during a disaster.

Have disaster supplies on hand, including the following items:

- Flashlight
- A portable, battery-operated radio
- Extra batteries
- First aid kit and manual
- Emergency food and water
- Non-electric can opener
- Essential medicines
- Cash and credit cards
- Sturdy shoes
- Special equipment and supplies (e.g., hearing aid batteries or a spare wheelchair)

Maintain a list of the following items and store it with the emergency supplies:

- Prescription drug names and dosages family members are currently taking
- Names, addresses and telephone numbers for doctors and pharmacists
- Detailed information about the medication schedule for disabled family members

Contact the local emergency information management office and see if they maintain a registry of people with disabilities. Have disabled friends and relatives add their names to the list so they can be located and assisted quickly in the event of a disaster.

Have people with disabilities wear medical alert bracelets to identify their disability in case of an emergency.

Know the location and availability of more than one facility if you or a family member is dependent on a dialysis machine or other life-sustaining equipment and treatment.

Create an Assistance and Evacuation Network

People with disabilities will have special needs if they have to evacuate their homes during an emergency. You can create an assistance and evacuation network for people with disabilities with relatives, neighbors, friends and co-workers. Community members in the network will help people with disabilities in the event of an emergency in a number of ways:

- By contacting them and relaying emergency messages
- By keeping emergency supplies in their homes or places of business
- By assisting if an evacuation order is issued
- By providing the physical assistance needed to help people with disabilities leave their home or office
- By providing transportation to a shelter which may require a specialized vehicle designed to carry a wheelchair or other mobility equipment

If you are going to help a person with a wheelchair during an emergency make sure you know how to operate and transport the chair. Make sure you can safely get the person into and out of your vehicle, and make certain your vehicle has enough room for the wheelchair in case it has to be transported.

Resources

- American Red Cross: www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/disaster-safety-for-people-with-disabilities.html
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/emergencypreparedness.html
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA): www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/897

Some content on this page was gathered from documents found on the website for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), at www.fema.gov.

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