



Disaster Planning for Elderly and Disabled Populations



During emergencies, the elderly and disabled have many of the same needs as the general population. However, there are a number of situations requiring a different approach by emergency managers.

People with age-related or physical disabilities have different needs at different points in the disaster cycle. Emergency planning should identify the following:

- Individuals who require special attention
- Visually impaired who need information in a media accessible to them
- Hearing impaired who need special help to receive messages
- People who use wheelchairs, or are otherwise mobility impaired, and who need special rescue techniques and transportation that is accessible for them
- Shelters which must be accessible
- Mentally impaired who need training and constant reinforcement to learn steps to save themselves
- Post-disaster needs which must be met over an extended period of time

Meeting these needs does not have to be costly. Some can be solved by education, others by modest investments, but they should be addressed in a structured manner. The following questions should be answered:

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Document DH-031,
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- Can the hearing and visually impaired interpret alarms?
- Are there provisions for TV crawl notices for the hearing impaired, strobe lights for the deaf and elevator accommodations for the disabled during an evacuation?
- Will elevators be sent to the first floor automatically in a fire?
- Are special size letters being used for training and announcements to accommodate the visually impaired?
- Are emergency classes being conducted for the hearing impaired

- with an interpreter present?
- Does emergency training exist for the mentally impaired at rehabilitation or vocational schools?
- Is the number of special vehicle conveyances in your area adequate for a large-scale emergency?
- Are there special provisions for search and rescue of the elderly and disabled?



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Identifying Disabled and Elderly Populations

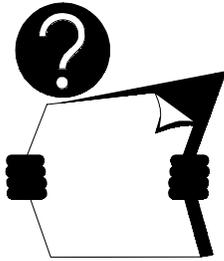
There are common problems in the identification of disabled and elderly populations which emergency managers must appreciate. In most neighborhoods and small cities, the deaf and those in wheelchairs are generally known through an informal communications network. Thus, in an emergency, the disabled and elderly are relatively easy to locate and assist. The situation changes in large cities and expansive jurisdictions. Many people live anonymous lives in big cities and large suburbs. Handicapped people in these areas may not wish to be identified as such for the following reasons:

- They fear heightened vulnerability to crime.
- They do not want such things as handicap decals on their home windows that may be seen as an invitation to crime, nor do they want their names openly listed as disabled.
- They fear employment or social discrimination if their disability is revealed.
- The disabled population must be willing to cooperate with whatever system of emergency identification is devised.

Access to Information

People with perceptual or mental handicaps face a more difficult learning task than the population at large. For the perceptually impaired, the problem is access to information; for the mentally handicapped, the problem is understanding instructions.

There are resources available to help educate the disabled community. For example, a basic public information booklet, "In Time of Emergency," is available on cassette and in braille through the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. Local organizations can help direct emergency planners to other information sources.



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Warning Systems for the Disabled

Emergency managers face serious problems in notifying hearing impaired persons about an evacuation or other emergency information. Where sirens are available, deaf people will not hear them.

Without visual repetition of what is being said on the screen, television is often of little use to deaf people. Decoding machines are available that provide captions without the captions appearing on sets unequipped with the devices. However, short printed messages convey only so much information. To reach the deaf, emergency broadcasts need a combination of the crawl, which fills the screen with printed information, and sign language interpretation. Emergency managers should bring local television outlets and the deaf community together to ensure adequate information during crises.

Increasing numbers of hearing impaired persons use telecommunications devices, such as TDD or TTY (telecommunications device for the deaf or telephone teletype). The typewriter- or teletype-like machines are portable and provide a typescript. More than 100,000 such units are in use throughout the United States. Most larger communities have TDDs at police and fire headquarters. They are also recommended for emergency management offices, hospitals and other installations that might become involved in a disaster. In addition, the TDD can be used to provide a warning network among local deaf citizens.

Your state may also have a Relay Service in which you use a regular telephone to communicate with a hearing impaired person who has a TDD. With the Relay Service, you call a number (usually toll free), tell the operator the TDD number, and the operator makes contact with the person through the TDD. You then speak at a slightly slower pace as the operator types your spoken words to the TDD. The operator then reads aloud the text of the TDD back to you.

Emergency personnel should know a few basic phrases in American Sign Language. Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. [(202) 651-5130] provides training materials to police and fire departments. Tests by the National Research Council of Canada show that deaf persons respond best when the emergency worker's symbol of authority is clearly in evidence and the worker appears confident. Emergency workers should carry notepads and pencils;

many deaf persons will not believe that a hearing person knows sign language, and may perceive signs only as wild gestures.

Evacuation of the Elderly and Disabled

Different disability groups have different problems when evacuation is required. Persons who are blind can walk to an evacuation point, either unaided or with the help of a guide. Deaf people and many who use wheelchairs can drive. This accounts for a significant part of the disabled population. But there are persons who have mobility impairments that make it impossible to operate a car. Even if a person can drive, he or she may be on the upper floor of a high rise that is without power, and must be evacuated. For a significant number of people, the problem of evacuation is often just leaving the house.

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The safest and most convenient way to evacuate persons who use wheelchairs or other assisted devices is in modified vans. Social service agencies and some individuals own such vehicles. Emergency managers should make contact with area social service agencies to request that inventories of such paratransit be maintained. Private citizens can also be contacted and asked to join emergency evacuation pools.

The capacity to accomplish the evacuation of the disabled and elderly may well be the most significant of emergency management functions. It must address:

- Good dialogue between needs and service providers
- Understanding of the magnitude of the demands
- Adequate and backup resources and conveyances to physically accomplish movement of people
- Confidence on the part of those being served that they are properly being cared for
- Productive means of communication and exercises to ensure that public safety personnel and volunteers get the message across
- A well-designed operations plan



Shelters for the Elderly and Disabled

Most jurisdictions already have congregate care arrangements in place. When possible, some communities attempt to direct all elderly or disabled persons to particular shelters. Living in a shelter is difficult at any time; the presence of very old and very young

people together could present real problems for managers. By design, shelters designated for elderly or handicapped people already are physically accessible. Food on hand should include some items that diabetics can eat without danger.

A unique problem that recently surfaced may become more common for shelter managers in the future: Blind persons who use guide dogs have traditionally been allowed to bring their animals into shelters, because it has been recognized that the dog functions as a part of the person's life support system. For the past decade or so, deaf persons also have been using dogs to alert them to a variety of household events, such as ringing doorbells, crying children and the like. Clearly, these are valuable animals that cannot be left outside. Severely disabled persons use dogs and monkeys as helper animals. They perform menial but critical chores, such as turning on appliances. These creatures are vital to mobility impaired persons. Arrangements will have to be made within shelters to accommodate these animals. Congregate care shelters require thorough planning and coordination. Two critical points should not be overlooked:

- When the danger has passed, additional care must be taken in returning the disabled and elderly to their home environments. This re-entry may be difficult or uncertain.
- In-place or at-home shelters present greater problems. There must be exceptional plans for rescue and recovery operations. A person's physical impairments may very well be heightened as a result of massive damages in their household or even along the way to the shelter.