

Emergency Assistance to People with Disabilities / Access and Functional Needs

The following tips are adapted from the California Office of Emergency Services.

MOBILITY IMPAIRMENT

Elevators should not be used unless directed by the fire department.

Move the person in a wheelchair or by using the safest method to a stairwell landing located away from the incident (fire, smoke). Close the door to the stairwell and notify DPS that evacuation assistance is needed. Provide the building name, stairwell number/location and floor number. Avoid blocking others from moving down the stairs. Never leave a wheelchair in a stairwell.

Stairway evacuation of wheelchair users or mobility-impaired persons should be conducted by trained professionals from the fire department. Only in situations of extreme danger should untrained bystanders attempt to evacuate them. If this must be attempted, options include:

Two-Person Cradle Carry

Wait until other evacuees have moved down the stairwell.

The two helpers stand on either side of the disabled evacuee.

They reach under the individual and lift out in a cradle.

Helpers control the descent by walking slowly and cautiously.

Office Chair Evacuation

Transfer the mobility-impaired individual to a sturdy office chair.

One helper gently leans the chair backward; the other helper faces the chair and holds it by the front legs.

Both lift the chair simultaneously and control the descent by bending their legs slowly and keeping their backs straight.

BLIND/LOW VISION

- Announce your presence, speak out, state the nature of the emergency, and then enter the area.
- Speak directly to the visually-impaired individual. Avoid shouting.
- Offer assistance but allow the individual to explain what help is needed. Avoid grabbing and ask permission before attempting to guide them.
- When assisting, offer your arm. As you walk, alert the individual of any nearby obstacles (stairs, doorways, narrow passages, ramps).
- If leading more than one visually impaired individual, ask them to help guide the person behind them.
- Once you have reached a safe location, provide a brief orientation of where the individual is located and ask if any further assistance is needed.

DEAF OR HARD-OF-HEARING

- If possible, flick the lights when entering an area or room to get the individual's attention.
- Establish eye contact with the individual, not with the interpreter or "buddy," if one is present.
- Use facial expressions and hand gestures as visual cues.
- Keep your face visible at all times and keep instructions in the present tense using basic vocabulary.
- Once individual is in a safe location, offer pencil and paper for written communication if no interpreter or "buddy" is present.

MENTAL/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

- Speak slowly and in a calm tone.
- Keep communication straightforward, clear and brief.
- If the person exhibits confusion, avoid giving multiple commands. Give one instruction at a time.

- Try not to interrupt when they are speaking but let them know you have to move quickly.
- Lean forward to show interest and concern.

COGNITIVE DISABILITIES

In helping to evacuate individuals with cognitive disabilities, look for signs of elevated stress levels, such as:

- Fleeting eye contact
- Repetitive or self-stimulating behaviors (rocking, hand-flapping, repeating words/sounds/phrases, wiggling fingers in front of the eyes, twirling/ spinning, and/or jumping)
- Self-injurious behaviors (slapping, head banging, biting, hair pulling)
- Fear/panic
- Non-responsiveness
- Aggression
- Running away, covering ears or screeching.

To enhance communication, use the following strategies:

- Make eye contact
- Be patient
- Speak slowly, use plain and concrete language
- Give one-step directions. –Wait two seconds and repeat
- Be mindful of your body language (non-verbal cues)
- Do not touch
- Model the expected response (hands up, fingers apart, etc.)

SERVICE ANIMALS

Service animals are not registered. If the owner tells you it is a service animal, treat it as such.

- Evacuate the owner and the animal together. Avoid separating them whenever possible.
- If an animal is wearing a harness or vest, it is on duty. If you are asked to take the animal while assisting the owner, hold it by the leash, not by the harness (if applicable).
- If the animal is out of control or presents a threat to the owner or others, remove it from the scene.
- People with psychiatric and emotional disabilities may have a companion animal with no special training. Be understanding and treat the animal as a service animal.