

National Preparedness Month –September 2008:

SCHOOL PREPAREDNESS IS FOR *EVERYONE!*

Emergency Planning for Students with Disabilities

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

It is of extreme importance that parents and guardians of students with disabilities make certain that school and daycare providers have emergency response plans which address the individual requirements of each child with special needs. Parents should learn the facility's preparedness policies and inquire how the school will communicate with families during a crisis. Parents should ask if there is an adequate storage of food, water, and other basic supplies. Another important question is whether a facility is prepared to "shelter-in-place" (remain in a secure, windowless area) and, also, where they plan to go if they must evacuate. By knowing the answers to these questions and communicating with school and daycare representatives in advance, parents will be better prepared to safely reunite with their family and loved ones during an emergency.

Medications:

Many students with special needs require specific medications. According to the Utah State Office of Education's Emergency Preparedness Plan, extensive emergencies may require having medication available for a period beyond that of the school day. Therefore, if possible, medication should be on hand to last a minimum of 24 hours. It is also recommended that specific medical information should accompany the student so it is available during a crisis. Also, it may be necessary to carry medications outside in an emergency situation involving evacuation.

Campus Concerns:

It is essential that all people on a campus be prepared in the event of an emergency. San Francisco State University lists suggestions for how people with

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disabilities can become better prepared for emergencies and how other faculty/staff/students can assist them.

TIPS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

1. Let instructors or coworkers know if you will need assistance getting out of a classroom and/or building in case of a fire, earthquake or other disaster. Find out the location of the nearest stairwell to your position. Ask for their assistance in working out an evacuation plan.
2. Inform rescue workers of the safest and most comfortable way to assist you in evacuating. If you use a wheelchair and will need to be carried downstairs, let rescuers know how you prefer to be carried and explain any precautions they will need to take in order to avoid causing you any discomfort or injury.
3. If you take prescription medications on a daily basis, carry a three- to five-day supply with you at all times. In an emergency situation, you may not be able to get to your home or to a pharmacy for several days.
4. If you have any medical conditions or drug allergies that emergency personnel should know about, keep written information in your wallet, purse, backpack, etc. Include the names and phone numbers of friends or relatives who can be contacted in the event of an emergency.

TIPS FOR FACULTY/SUPERVISORS

1. Inform all students/employees of the nearest exit to use in case of an emergency. Faculty can print this information in the course syllabus and announce it on the first day of class.
2. Encourage students/employees who may need assistance in an emergency to identify themselves and to make an evacuation plan.
3. Develop a "buddy system" by recruiting at least two volunteers to assist each person with a disability who requests evacuation assistance.

GUIDELINES FOR EVACUATING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

- Be aware of all marked exits from your area and building. Building Emergency Coordinators have maps showing emergency exit routes for your building. In all emergencies, evacuate people with disabilities if possible.
- Do not use elevators (unless authorized) since they could fail during a fire or a major earthquake.
- It may be necessary to help clear the exit route of debris (if possible) so that a person with a disability can move out to a safer area.
- Always ask someone with a disability how you can help before giving assistance. Ask how the person can be best assisted and whether there are any other considerations to take or items that need to come with the person.
- Do not grasp a visually impaired person's arm; ask if he or she would like to hold on to your arm to exit. Warn the person about steps. Be specific in your verbal instructions (i.e., "to the right," rather than "this way"). Keep guide dogs together with their owners whenever possible.
- Attempt a rescue evacuation only if you have had rescue training or if the person is in immediate danger and cannot wait for professional assistance. Evacuating a disabled or injured person yourself should be considered a last resort. Evaluate your options and the risks of injuring yourself and others in an evacuation attempt. Do not make an emergency situation worse.
- Once outside, move to a clear area that is at least 500 feet away from the affected building. Keep streets and walkways clear for emergency vehicles and personnel.

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From pre-school to college, communication and awareness are the key elements in emergency planning for students with disabilities.

Resources: Preparedness and Planning Links

Emergency Preparedness in Schools

<http://www.emergencyinfoonline.org/emereprep.php>

Bridge Multimedia's free directory, Emergency Information Online, offers a webpage with information on school related preparedness resources provided by government agencies, non-profit organizations, commercial enterprises, and concerned citizens. This page also features a section called School Accessibility Resources, with links to sites such as Gallaudet University's "How can Deaf and Hard of Hearing People know about Emergencies?" and the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities' "Creating Accessible Schools."

Emergency Preparedness for Children with Special Health Care Needs

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/epcovrltr.htm>

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Emergency Physicians offer a downloadable form, designed to assure prompt and appropriate care for Children with Special Health Care Needs. This form is to be filled out and filed at a child's school in case of an emergency.

About The Authors

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemediamedia.com.**