

National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

THE ONLY PLAN WORTH HAVING:

Emergency Plans that Include Workers with Disabilities

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Every company should have an emergency plan in place in the event of a disaster. When determining whether or not your company's emergency plan would be effective for individuals with disabilities, there are many questions for an employer to consider. For example, in the event of an emergency, would employees with mobility impairments be trapped if they worked above the ground floor? Would employers be able to inform emergency response workers about the medical needs of any injured employees with disabilities? What if employees with special medical requirements were stranded in the workplace?

According to the Job Accommodation Network, "The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) requires that employers, public services, and public accommodations and services operated by private entities modify their policies and procedures to include people with disabilities. This means that employers may be required to provide reasonable accommodations to employees so they can evacuate during emergencies. If visitors are allowed on the work site, a business may want to invite voluntary disclosure about whether they require assistance in an emergency."

Recommendations:

The United States Department of Labor offers suggestions to consider when developing, implementing and maintaining a workplace emergency plan:

- Ensure that all phases of emergency management consider the needs of people with disabilities. Involve individuals with disabilities at the planning stage in order to ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are adequately addressed in the plan.
- Obtain support and commitment from senior-level management to assure appropriate financial and personnel resources.

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- Involve key personnel in emergency management activities, including building managers, safety and security personnel, first responders, managers and the disability community.
- Educate all necessary staff as to the steps for evaluating an emergency and taking subsequent action. With regard to shelter-in-place, establish plans that facilitate communication with all staff and visitors, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Ensure that necessary procedures, equipment, signage and supports are in place to safely evacuate all employees. Remember to consider individuals with various types of disabilities. Talk with employees, other employers, community-based organizations and local emergency response personnel to determine the most appropriate solutions for your workplace and employees.
- Ensure that all employees and visitors, including those who are deaf, hard of hearing, blind or have low vision, have access to the same information in a detailed and timely manner.
- Develop a support network of several individuals without disabilities who are willing to assist employees with disabilities in an emergency.

Practice Makes Perfect

Once you have developed a viable emergency plan, practice it regularly. Practice is a crucial element of emergency preparedness. Run drills for various forms of emergencies. Each drill should be conducted as seriously as if it were an actual emergency. Practice provides the opportunity to “work the bugs out” of your emergency plan so you can develop the most effective plan possible. Remember that planning is an ongoing effort, and plans (and associated documents) should never be regarded as final or complete. They must be evaluated on a regular basis and updated as required. The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Policy states that “while employers bear much of the responsibility for emergency preparedness planning, employees with disabilities must also take the initiative to ensure their safety. Employees should not assume plans have or will be put in

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place for them. Regardless of the circumstances, emergency preparedness plans must be flexible. It is a very real possibility that not everyone who needs assistance in an emergency has self-identified. In addition, there may be instances when an emergency exacerbates existing impairments or creates new ones, affecting an individual's ability to evacuate. Effective practice helps build flexibility into an agency emergency preparedness plan and improve the safety and security of all employees.”

Resources:

STEPS FOR INCLUDING EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES IN EMERGENCY EVACUATION PLANNING

<http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/emergency.html>

Interest in emergency evacuation planning has increased dramatically since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In turn, the Job Accommodation Network posts an online publication designed to answer employers' questions about their legal obligation to develop emergency evacuation plans and how to include employees with disabilities in such plans.

About The Authors

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