National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

WHEN TECHNOLOGY FAILS:
Low-Tech and No-Tech Emergency Planning
By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Emergencies are most often unexpected and unpredictable. The key to having an emergency plan that really works is the ability to adjust to any situation that might occur, along with the accessibility of the plan to be implemented by all people who could be present at any given time. Having a plan that relies on little or no technology is a good idea; even as a back up when more advanced technology is available. For people who rely on assistive technology in an emergency, a situation such as a power outage can be life threatening. In such cases, it is necessary to have a plan that involves the use of little or no technology. Additionally, while an office building might not own an expensive, high-tech emergency evacuation chair if they have no employee that would require its use, it is still necessary to have an accessible plan in case such a person happens to be visiting or present during an emergency.

When creating an emergency plan, it's important to think of the people who frequent your home or office, but to also consider that unexpected visits *do* happen. You should ask yourself "Could anyone use this plan effectively? Am I leaving anyone out? Is the plan complicated or hard to follow?" Think about it this way: if you had a person who is elderly, blind, or in a wheelchair, would they be able to follow your emergency plan? By considering the following tips, you can help to make your plan accessible to the widest range of people.

Low-Tech Solutions
A low-tech plan is simply one that uses as little technology as possible. While low-tech means that there are some aids involved, they often don't rely on electricity and are generally self-explanatory to use. A low-tech plan will often use pictograms or signs in order to convey a message quickly during an emergency, which can be useful to people who are hearing impaired, don't speak

English, or cannot read. Using the universal symbol for hospital is a more common example of a low-tech pictogram.

Another low-tech solution is adding Braille to signs, especially signs that label an exit or which floor of a building you are on. Relatively inexpensive, these signs may save the life of someone who is blind and trying to navigate an unfamiliar building alone.

Universal design is an increasingly common term that represents the idea that a building or public space should be easily accessible to all people. Ideas such as wide hallways that can fit wheelchairs, emergency alarms that can be both seen and heard, and doors that can be opened without exerting a lot of strength are all examples of universal design. While it is understandable that not all older buildings have been built this way, you can do your part to make your space more universally accessible by doing simple things such as moving furniture around or making an expanded archway where there once was a narrow door. Instead of only having automatic opening doors that rely on electricity, you can install doors that are lightweight and can swing both ways, so someone in a wheelchair can pass through them without assistance.

No-Tech Solutions

No-tech plans rely more upon people than upon aids. The bottom line is that technology is not always reliable, and there is no better solution than to simply be prepared. By practicing plans such as evacuation routes on a regular basis, people feel more comfortable and therefore less panicked if an emergency were to occur. Practice of evacuation routes also helps expose weaknesses and show where improvement is needed.

Simple ideas such as the "buddy system" are not only for school children. Using a buddy system is a great way to ensure that everyone is accounted for. Instead of one teacher or head of an office keeping track of everyone, each person can keep track of one other person. In many cases, this can speed up rescue efforts after an evacuation because people are faster to realize who is missing. People with special needs should be assigned a buddy who will be the designated

person to help them in an emergency. Of course, there should always be a meeting place outside, where people will go once they have safely evacuated. This will ensure that valuable rescue time isn't wasted looking for someone who has already gotten out of the building.

In situations where a person with special needs is involved, it is a good idea to have everyone around learn at least basic ways to help in an emergency. For example, in a classroom with a deaf student, all children and teachers should at least know enough sign language to tell the student that there is an emergency and should evacuate. In an office where there is an employee in a wheelchair, all other employees should at least know how to work an emergency evacuation chair. While there might be one person who is the designated person, everyone should have basic knowledge of how to help.

A Universal Plan

When creating an emergency plan, it is absolutely crucial to include all possible people that might be present during the emergency. It is understandable that not all people can afford expensive technology or to completely re-model their homes to be universally accessible. Low-tech and no-tech planning is perfect for situations such as these because it is do-it-yourself, inexpensive, and easy to maintain. It is important to remember that even if technology is available, there *must* be a back up plan! Low-tech and no-tech plans are usually easy to understand and can be carried out by people who might not be familiar with technology. There is no technological upkeep or reliance on electricity. It only takes some critical thinking and foresight to be able to come up with a plan that will suit the needs of anyone, regardless of ability or disability.

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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 <ins>jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com</ins>.**