



Understanding the needs of People with Disabilities in Disaster and Emergency Situations

*Robin A Jones, Director (guinness@uic.edu)
Great Lakes ADA Center
Department on Disability and Human Development
University of Illinois at Chicago*

1



What's the problem?

People with disabilities --

- are not currently included in emergency planning and little, if any, communication exists between planners, responders and the disability community
- have a wide variety of communication, support and health needs that differentiate them from persons without disabilities

2



What's the law?

Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act (EPCRA)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

3



Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) & 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Prohibits

- discrimination against people with disabilities based on their disability
- exclusion from services or activities available to the general public

Requires

- equivalent access
- integration versus segregation

4



Does the ADA & 504 apply? (continued)

- Emergency Response is a core program/service of local and state government
- Specific requirements for 911 and telephone emergency services and non-discrimination on the basis of disability
- Increased emphasis through settlement agreements, etc. with local governments via Project Civic Access (DOJ) to include emergency planning, communication and evacuation as part of the self-evaluation and transition planning process

5



Discrimination

- Civil rights protection
- Guarantees equal opportunity in employment, public accommodations, transportation, State and local government services (regardless of size), and telecommunications

6

6



Equal Access

- Removal of barriers:
 - buildings, transportation services, ramps, elevators
- Appropriate forms of communications:
 - interpreters, alternate media formats, auditory and visual signals

7

7



Test of Reasonableness

A public entity must make reasonable modifications in policies, practices and procedures to ensure equal access to persons with disabilities

- Unless doing so would result in having to fundamentally alter the nature of the program or service

8

8

Self-Evaluation and Transition Planning

- Evaluate what services are currently provided to citizens and how people with disabilities are included and/or excluded
 - Notification Systems
 - Text
 - Telephone
 - Sirens
 - TV/Radio
- Identify someone responsible for addressing ADA related issues
 - Contact information for the public

9



Who are people with disabilities?

People with:

- Visual impairments (Blind or low vision)
- Hearing impairments (deaf or hard of hearing)
- Speech and language impairments
- Intellectual disabilities (down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, Fragile X syndrome, etc.)
- Mobility impairments (paralysis, arthritis, etc.)
- Emotional disorders (mood disorders, psychotic disorders, etc.)
- Major medical conditions (heart disease, diabetes, etc.)
- Many people will have multiple disorders

10



What about hidden disabilities?

- Mild intellectual impairments (memory loss, etc.)
- Mild emotional disorders (stress or anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Episodic behaviors (asthma, migranes, etc.)
- Seizure disorders
- Learning disabilities

11



Are there others who have similar needs?

People who:

- Do not speak English or LEP
 - Increase # of immigrants/refugees with disabilities or member of their family with disability
- Are considered elderly/senior citizens
 - Often do not identify as “disabled”
- Are considered homeless
 - High percentage of the homeless population have some form of disability

12



Appropriate language

- People first language: i.e person with ...
- Wheelchair user -- not wheelchair bound
- Person with an intellectual disability or who has Down's Syndrome, -- not Mongoloid, cretin, retard
- Person who is not disabled or person without a disability-- not "normal person"

13



Other Appropriate Language

- Avoid words that have other negative connotations -- suffers from, afflicted, stricken, victim, invalid, having "fits"
- Don't refer to people with disabilities as -- lame, insane, crazy, loony, lunatic, mad, maniac, mental, neurotic, nuts, simple
- What about the word handicapped? **DON'T USE THIS WORD!!!**

14

Let's talk about specific Issues



15



What are some issues for individuals with disabilities?

- Communication barriers
- Comprehension of information/instructions
- Access to Emergency warning – Sirens, horns, lights, televised alerts or radio broadcasts, etc.
- Assistance needed to:
 - Shelter in place
 - Evacuation
- Support during and after an emergency
- Rarely consulted or asked to participate in the planning process

16



Strategies for Successful Responses to Emergencies

- Include people with disabilities in the planning process
 - Ensure meetings are accessible
- Include disability specific procedures
 - Include different types of disability
- Train response personnel about disability issues
- Provide pro-active information to members of the disability community for personal preparation/planning purposes
- Create a voluntary identification listing
 - Voluntary identification of self and needs
 - Buddy programs for checking on locations where people with disabilities, elderly, etc. may be more isolated and not aware of what is going on around them.

17



Train response personnel

- Include disability awareness information for everyone on a regular basis
- Include procedures for assisting individuals with disabilities in all emergency preparedness training
- Include individuals with disabilities as trainers
- Be prepared for disagreement -- particularly within the disability community

18

Resources for Additional Information



19



Resources

- American Red Cross, Disaster preparedness for people with disabilities, Disaster Services, American Red Cross, Washington, DC
<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/inclusive-preparedness-resources.html>
- National Council on Independent Living, 1916 Wilson Blvd., Suite 209 Arlington, VA 22201, (703) 525-3406, TTY: (703) 525-4153, Fax: (703) 525-3409, Email: ncil@ncil.org

20



Resources

- National Organization on Disability, Disaster Preparedness Initiative. Public and private program to address the needs of people with disabilities in disasters. Fact sheets and resources available at www.nod.org
- US Access Board – Federal agency responsible for developing accessibility guidelines. Sample emergency evacuation plan posted to their web site along with resources for more information at www.access-board.gov

21



Resources

- FEMA, Federal Agency responsible for coordinating emergency responses at the local, state and national level. Has resources related to people with disabilities and emergency preparedness/evacuation. www.fema.gov
- U.S. Department of Justice Toolkit for Local and State Government, Chapter 7, Emergency Management
<https://www.ada.gov/pcatoolkit/toolkitmain.htm>

22

CONTACT US:

Great Lakes ADA Center
University of Illinois at Chicago
www.adagreatlakes.org
800-949-4232 (V/TTY)
312-413-1856 (Fax)
adagreatlakes@uic.edu

23