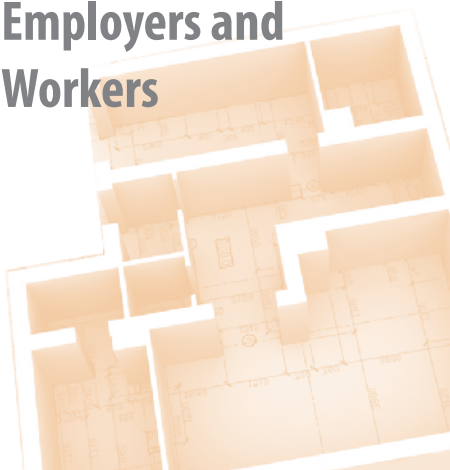


# Workplace Emergency Planning for Workers with Disabilities

A Handbook for  
Employers and  
Workers



**BC Coalition  
of People with  
Disabilities**

**2008**

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TTY 604-875-8835; email: karen@bccpd.bc.ca; www.bccpd.bc.ca.  
Please visit our website to see current information on emergency preparedness.

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## Why this handbook is needed

It is every employer's responsibility to provide a safe place for all employees to work, including employees with disabilities.



The workplace presents many potential hazards for workers with disabilities during an emergency or disaster. It is important that all workers and employers are aware of these hazards and know what to do to prevent injury or death.

Planning for alternative communications and inclusive evacuation and recovery procedures becomes of key importance to employee safety in disaster situations from fires, floods, hazardous materials incidents, and earthquakes. Knowledge, planning, and practice will protect workers with disabilities and save lives.

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## The purpose of this handbook

1. To promote safety in the workplace for people with disabilities and to prevent injury or death
2. To educate employers and workers about the needs of people with disabilities in emergency preparedness in the workplace
3. To provide employers and workers with practical solutions and strategies they can use in their emergency planning

Creating a culture of safety in the workplace is fundamental to overcoming workers' fears and anxiety around emergency evacuation planning.

It is important to have the support and understanding of senior staff in order to successfully incorporate planning for workers with disabilities into the workplace emergency plan and procedures.

Creating a culture of safety in the workplace is fundamental to overcoming workers' fears and anxiety around emergency evacuation planning.

Use of a network versus a buddy system:

A buddy system is not as effective as developing an assistance network.

The buddy may be absent, away from the work area, or may forget or become frightened during an emergency and abandon the employee with the disability.

Having two or more people in the employee's network will reduce this risk.

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## Examples of how disabilities will impact emergency planning

The deaf and hard of hearing may not have the ability to hear or react to emergency warning systems or aural instructions.

Visual disabilities will affect a person's ability to identify escape routes, directional information, instructions, objects or hazards. This will increase their evacuation time.

Mobility disabilities may affect a person's ability to independently leave the worksite, use stairs or open doors.

Respiratory disabilities may affect a person's ability to walk long distances and perform tasks that require excessive physical activity, such as evacuating a building. These limitations may be exacerbated by smoke, dust, fumes and chemicals.

Speech disabilities, such as difficulties with articulation, voice strength, language expression or total loss of speech, will affect a person's ability to communicate during an emergency.

Cognitive disabilities may affect a person's ability to respond to emergencies in the following ways: memory loss, problems with orientation, distractibility, perception and difficulty thinking logically.

Mental illness or mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour which may be exacerbated in an emergency situation.

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## Determining staff/volunteer needs and personnel resources

### Assessing staff and volunteer needs during an emergency

Establish a process within your emergency planning for the following:

- Self-assessment and self-disclosure for workers and volunteers with disabilities and what their needs will be during emergencies.
- Enabling workers to notify management of changes in their disability or the development of temporary disabilities, such as recent injuries or surgeries.
- Maintaining a list for emergency personnel of workers who will need assistance during emergencies and their location in the building
- ensuring that the collection of personal information about a worker's disability for the purposes of the workplace emergency plan is in compliance with the Privacy Act.

- Determining accommodation options for emergency notification and evacuation. Ask the employee that will need accommodations for their suggestions, work together and plan for changes in the employee's condition.

### Identifying staff and volunteers who can assist workers with disabilities during an emergency

Establish a network of co-workers who can assist the person with a disability during emergencies. When identifying those who will be a part of the person's network consider the following:

- They should be physically and mentally capable of performing the task.
- They do not need assistance themselves.
- They should work the same hours and in the same area as the person they will be assisting.
- The worker with the disability should be involved in selecting those who will be trained to assist them during an emergency (a minimum of two people is recommended).

### Resources

See Appendix I for an example of a Staff and Volunteer Self-Assessment for Emergency Evacuation form.

Barrier example:  
The height of most manual pull fire alarms and fire extinguishers in buildings do not take into consideration wheelchair users.

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## Making the work site safer

### Doing a hazards assessment

An assessment of non-structural hazards and barriers in the workplace should be conducted:

- Do a walk-through of the facility with the employee(s) with disabilities and identify barriers to successful evacuation.
- Look for objects in the workplace that may fall and injure employees, as well as any objects that may obstruct passage ways and could hinder the person with a disability from safely exiting the building.

There are many methods of communication for emergencies: fire alarms, pager systems, phones/TTY, public address systems, wireless communication devices, company website information, Computer Electronic Notification Systems (CENS) compatible with screen readers and speech recognition software, televisions with open-captioning, scrolling reader boards, and two-way radios.

## Addressing the hazards and barriers

To address the identified worksite hazards and barriers for workers with disabilities establish the following:

- who will be responsible for addressing the identified hazards and barriers
- a process for how the hazards will be addressed
- monitoring of hazards
- a system for reporting new hazards

## Emergency supplies

In the Lower Mainland, emergency supplies and kits for the workplace and home can be purchased through Braidner Survival Kits, Vancouver, 604-254-0455.

## Resources

**General emergency supplies/kit information:** Visit your local government authority's website for information on general emergency supplies, as well as the Provincial Emergency Program's website, <http://www.pep.gov.ca>.

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## Emergency communications

The ability to communicate quickly with all employees in the office or building is critical during an emergency.

### Information and notification

Employers should consider the following:

- Ensure that all employees and visitors – including those who are deaf and hard of hearing or have visual impairments – have access to the same information in a detailed and timely manner.
- Put multiple methods in place to notify individuals of emergency plans and procedures; provide alternative formats appropriate to your workforce.
- During emergency training sessions and meetings, provide sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices or other aids to enable effective communication with workers who are deaf and hard of hearing.



- Install visual alarms/lighted fire strobes for deaf employees.
- Provide tactile/Braille signage and maps and/or audible directional signage to assist workers with visual disabilities who must navigate smoke-filled exit routes.
- Colour code fire doors and exit ways for workers with cognitive disabilities.
- Provide a picture book of drill procedures for workers with cognitive disabilities.

### Communication devices/accommodations

Communication devices enable communication with people who have speech, hearing or cognitive disabilities. The following are some accommodation solutions:

- augmentative communication aid
- speech amplification device
- speech enhancer
- alpha-numeric pager or vibrating pager
- wireless devices to provide two-way instant messaging, email and internet access; these can include: cell phones, Blackberries and other mobile devices
- pre-written notes about emergency procedures

### Resources

Communication devices from Project Safe EV-AC: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/comm.htm>

Visual alarms: <http://www.access-board.gov/adaag/html/adaag.htm.#4.28>

Paging devices from Project Safe EV-AC: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/pag.htm>

Alerting devices: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/alert.htm>

Tactile signage: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/educ/Accomm/graph.htm>

Tactile graphics and maps: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/graph.htm>

If you are trapped in an elevator during an emergency: people with speech disabilities should be aware ahead of time whether the elevator telephone at their workplace is limited to voice communications and where the emergency signaling device rings – does it ring inside the building or to an outside line – and who will be responding to it.

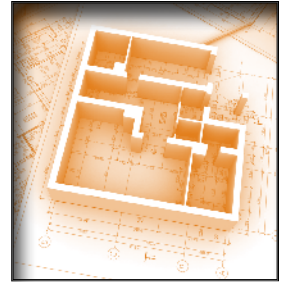


During the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers, individuals with disabilities died waiting in areas of refuge for first responders to arrive.

## Evacuations

### Responsibility of employer

- Provide the same level of safety for all employees during evacuations.
- Include the safe evacuation of personnel during **non-business hours** – shift workers and building cleaners – in your emergency plan.



### Responsibility of employee with a disability

- Be familiar with the building and your evacuation options – exits, stairwells, ramps, areas of refuge.
- Know your workplace emergency evacuation plan.
- Work with your employer to select co-workers who are able to assist you in case of an emergency.
- Participate in emergency drills.
- Be aware of the emergency notification systems at your workplace.
- Alert security personnel when entering the building after non-business hours; tell them where you will be located and the assistance you will need.

### Responsibility of emergency wardens

- Wardens should be trained in how to communicate with and safely evacuate people with disabilities.
- They provide information to first responders when they arrive about the number of people with disabilities waiting in areas of refuge and where they are located.

### Responsibility of all employees

Employees who are with clients or visitors with a disability should accompany the client or visitor and ensure their safe evacuation.

### Service animals

- They should be included in evacuation plans and participate in drills so they become familiar with emergency alarm sounds and evacuation routes.



- Individuals with a service animal should plan with their employer and workplace network how they can be assisted if their service animal becomes hesitant or disoriented during an emergency.

### Evacuation of workers and visitors with mobility disabilities

Not every emergency requires a full evacuation of the building. There are a number of evacuation options that should be planned for:

- **Horizontal evacuation:** Using exits that are horizontal to the ground level or moving into unaffected wings of the building.
- **Stairway evacuation:** Using stairs to reach the ground level exits of the building.
- **Area of refuge:** A member of the worker's network will assist the individual with a mobility disability to the safe refuge area and then will inform on-site emergency personnel and/or first responders of the location of the person(s) with a disability.
- **Areas of refuge should be used as a last resort. All other options should be considered first. However, choosing to wait for first responders in order to evacuate is a personal decision of the employee with a disability.**

Employers should include in their emergency plan the evacuation of mobility devices along with the user of the equipment.

**Definition of a fire refuge:** An area that is separated from fire by fire-resisting construction and which provides a safe route to a storey exit; it is a temporary safe space for people with disabilities to wait for evacuation assistance.

**Definition of circulation path:** A circulation path is a continuous and unobstructed way of moving from any point in the building to a public thoroughway. This may include rooms, hallways, doors, stairs, fire refuge areas, horizontal exits, ramps, exit passageways, fire escapes, fire escape ladders, slide escapes, escalators, moving walkways and elevators. **A person with a disability should be able to move unassisted through a circulation path to a public way or an area of refuge.**

**DO NOT LEAVE PEOPLE ON THE LANDINGS OF STAIRS.**

During the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers evacuation chairs saved lives.

The Boeing plant in Winnipeg provides Blackberries to its deaf employees in order for them to receive emergency evacuation information through text messaging.

## Evacuation chairs

**Definition:** Emergency evacuation devices that help move people with mobility disabilities down the stairs or across rough terrain.

Considerations for the use of evacuation devices:

- They are expensive to purchase.
- Ongoing training of staff on the use of the devices is needed.
- There are currently no industry safety standards for evacuation chairs.
- There is no one-size-fits all chair.
- Some people will be reluctant to use the evacuation device and would prefer to stay in their own wheelchair or scooter.
- Evacuation chairs can be an impediment to others evacuating if the stairway is not wide enough.
- Storage of the evacuation device must not be an obstruction in the stairwell.

## Planning for quick and safe egress for all workers and visitors

- Consider pre-designating a specific stairwell in the building for evacuation of workers and visitors with mobility disabilities.
- Those using evacuation chairs should begin to evacuate from an area of refuge after allowing the majority of the people in the building to evacuate down the stairwell. This is for the safety of:
  - the user of the evacuation chair,
  - the people assisting the user, and
  - other people in the building using the stairwell to evacuate.

## First responder considerations

- Evacuation by fire department personnel is usually limited to life threatening situations.
- Most fire departments will undertake evacuation of people with disabilities by means of the fire fighter service elevator if their personnel commitments permit.
- First responders are not usually trained in moving people with disabilities and will likely carry individuals “fire fighter style” which may cause injury to some people with disabilities.
- First responders are not trained in the use of evacuation chairs.

## When leaving the workplace after an emergency

Employees with disabilities:

- Have a plan in place to ensure transportation home if the workplace cannot be returned to after an evacuation.

Employers:

- If paratransit or accessible buses are not available because of the nature of the emergency, the employer should make a reasonable effort to ensure that their employees are not stranded without appropriate care.

## Resources

For BC's Occupational Health and Safety Regulations, Emergency Preparedness and Response, section 4.13, visit the WorkSafe BC website: <http://www.2.worksafebc.com/Publications/OHSRegulation/Part4.asp>

Evacuation chairs: Job Accommodation Network, <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/cgi-win/OrgQuery.exe?Sol193>; and Center for Disability Issues and the Health Professions, <http://www.cdihp.org/evacuation/resources.html>

Evacuation hoods: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/hood.htm>.

Respirators: <http://evac.icdi.wvu.edu/Accomm/resp.htm>.

Transfer strategies for evacuation and other helpful advice: Fire Safety for People with Disabilities, Canadian Paraplegic Association, <http://www.canparaplegic.org>

Consult your local fire department beforehand regarding their ability to provide elevator evacuation for wheelchair users and people with mobility disabilities.

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## Sheltering-in-place

When it is not safe to exit the building during an emergency, plans are needed to “shelter-in-place.”



### Responsibility of employer

- Have a shelter-in-place plan, as well as an evacuation plan, for the work site.
- The considerations and planning you provide for people with disabilities in other areas of the workplace emergency plan should be continued for the purposes of sheltering-in-place during an emergency.

### Responsibility of workers and individual contractors with disabilities

- Take responsibility for disability-specific needs and be prepared for sheltering in place.
- Workers should have their own personal preparedness kit on site with the following:
  - Extra medications.
  - Personal assistive equipment and devices, and extra batteries.
  - Food for specific dietary needs.
  - Wheelchair users should have in their personal preparedness kit a tire repair kit or extra tires in case of a flat tire from sharp debris caused by the emergency.

### Resources

[Shelter in Place at Your Office: a general guide for preparing a shelter in place plan in the workplace](#), National Institute for Chemical Studies, Charleston, WV, USA

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## Workplace emergency drills

When doing emergency drills:

- Include workers with disabilities in emergency exercises.
- Be aware that some people with disabilities may experience heightened anxiety during emergency drills and may need to be exempt from participating. One-on-one emergency planning with these individuals may be a good alternative.
- Address employee fears, anxiety and concerns during and after drills.
- During an emergency drill, it is not necessary for workers with mobility disabilities to evacuate the building completely. However, the person and their network should train separately from general drills in assistance techniques; for example, how to use an evacuation chair, if one is available, or in transfer and carrying techniques.
- If a worker says that she/he will not need assistance, but impedes other workers during an evacuation drill, talk to the individual directly and privately to work out a solution.

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## Working with community



### Planning considerations

Include the following in your emergency planning for workers with disabilities:

- Work with building security personnel and include them in emergency drills, as well as training them to assist workers with disabilities.
- Talk to other agencies or businesses in your building about your emergency plan and evacuation procedures.
- Consult with your local fire department about your emergency plan and make them aware of the number of employees that may need assistance in an emergency.
- Talk to disability organizations who can provide disability-specific information.

### Disability organizations

The following organizations are members of the Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities Committee (EPPDC):

BC Association of Individualized Technology and Supports for People with Disabilities, <http://www.propbcits.org>

BC Brain Injury Association, <http://www.bcbraininjury.com>

BC Coalition of People with Disabilities, <http://www.bccpd.bc.ca>

BC Paraplegic Association, <http://www.bcpara.org>

BC Persons with AIDS Society, <http://www.bcpwa.org>

Cerebral Palsy Association of BC, <http://www.bccerebralpalsy.com>

Neil Squire Society, <http://www.neilsquire.ca>

Voice of the Cerebral Palsied of Greater Vancouver, <http://www.vcpvgv.org>

Western Institute for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, <http://www.widhh.com>

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## After an emergency

### An employer should take leadership by:

- calling a staff meeting within 48 hours to talk about what has happened.
- acknowledging the fear, anxiety and loss workers are experiencing.
- providing information about next steps, and
- letting employees know when, where, and how operations will continue, if worksite operations have been disrupted.

### Resources

For excellent articles on crisis management, employer leadership, and how to talk with employees after an emergency or critical incident in the workplace, see <http://www.disaster-resource.com>

Paulk, Dan; Crisis Management International, *Leaving the Worksite After a Crisis: Providing Management-led De-escalation Meetings*

*Returning to Work After a Crisis: Providing Management Briefing Meetings*

VandePol, Bob, *Leading Employees Through Crisis*

Braverman, Mark, PH.D., *Managing the Human Impact of Crisis*

Crimando, Steven M., *Seven Steps to Employee Preparedness*

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## Having a written emergency plan and alternate formats

The written emergency plan is an important document that should include emergency policies, procedures, roles and responsibilities, communication protocols and resources.

### Alternative formats

Provide the written workplace emergency plan to workers with disabilities in alternative formats depending on their communication requirements, for example:

- Braille,
- large print,
- audio, and/or
- CD.

## Resources

The Canadian Council of Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) has general resource materials and e-courses on Emergency Response Planning. Visit their website: [http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/course\\_listing.html](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/course_listing.html)

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## Personal preparedness

### Employers can support employees in personal preparedness by:

- providing employees and volunteers with emergency preparedness information,
- encouraging workers to have emergency supplies at their work stations; for example, extra medications and special dietary foods, and
- encouraging workers to have an emergency plan for their home.



### Employees with disabilities should:

- have a personal preparedness plan for themselves and their family,
- have emergency supplies at their work station specific to their disability needs,
- plan how they will communicate their needs to first responders, and
- have something in place to ensure their transportation home if the workplace cannot be returned to after an evacuation

## Resources

Tips for People with Disabilities can be found on the Provincial Emergency Program website: [http://www.pep.gov.ca/hazard\\_preparedness/disabilities\\_information.html](http://www.pep.gov.ca/hazard_preparedness/disabilities_information.html)



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## Tips for interacting with people with disabilities during emergencies

The following are examples of ways to interact with people with various types of disabilities during an emergency.

### Visual Disabilities

- Announce your presence.
- Speak naturally and directly to the individual.
- Ask the person what kind of assistance they need.
- Describe the action needed to be taken in advance.
- Describe any obstacles in the path.
- Let the individual take your arm for guidance, do not grab them.
- After evacuating a person with a visual disability to a place of safety, do not leave them unassisted..
- If the person has an assistive animal, plan for the animal to be evacuated with the person.
- Do not pet or feed an assistive animal while it is on duty.

### Deaf and Hard of Hearing

- Flick the lights when entering the work areas of a person who is deaf or hard of hearing to get his/her attention.
- Use pen and paper; write slowly and let the deaf or hard of hearing person read as you write.
- Make sure the person has understood the urgency of the message.
- Be patient.
- Face the person directly and speak naturally for those persons who can lip-read.
- Provide the individual with a flashlight for signaling his/her location if he/she is separated from the group evacuating and to facilitate lip-reading in the dark.

### People with Cognitive and Learning Disabilities

- Accompany a person with a cognitive or learning disability because they may be confused by emergency instructions and signs for evacuation.
- Use simple directions.

- Be patient – the more severe the disability, the greater the response time will be.
- Be prepared to bodily remove the person from danger if they are unable to respond to instructions.
- Communicate with them in a calm manner.

### People with mobility disabilities

- Always ask the person what is the best way to assist them.
- Do not hold onto a person's wheelchair, as it is part of their personal space.

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### Further resources

Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities, National Fire Prevention Association, 2007

In Advance, Project Safe EV-AC

Preparing the Workplace for Everyone: Accounting for the Needs of People with Disabilities, A Framework of Emergency Preparedness Guidelines for Federal Agencies, Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities, USA, July 2005

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## APPENDIX I

### Staff and volunteer self-assessment for emergency evacuation

Will you need assistance in an emergency evacuation?

Do you experience any of the following conditions that could interfere with your ability to quickly evacuate a building?

**Yes**  **No**  Limitations that interfere with walking or using stairs, such as joint pain or mobility device user – wheelchair, canes, crutches, walker

**Yes**  **No**  Reduced stamina, fatigue or tire easily (due to a variety of temporary or permanent conditions not limited to those on this list)

**Yes**  **No**  Respiratory (heart conditions, asthma, emphysema or other symptoms triggered by stress, exertion, or exposure to small amounts of dust or smoke, etc.)

**Yes**  **No**  Emotional, cognitive, thinking, or learning difficulties (may become confused when dealing with unfamiliar and unusual activity during an emergency, may lose sense of direction, or may need emergency directions explained in simple steps or basic concepts)

**Yes**  **No**  Vision loss (may require assistance in learning the emergency evacuation routes or assistance in moving downstairs)

**Yes**  **No**  Hearing Loss (may require modification to the standard way emergency announcements, notifications and instructions are provided)

**Yes**  **No**  Temporary limitations resulting from, but not limited to surgery, accidents and injuries (sprains, broken bones), pregnancy

**Yes**  **No**  Rely on technology or medication that may not work in an emergency (hearing aids, wheelchair, elevator, lighting, sounds)

**Other** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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## APPENDIX II

### Emergency health information card for employees

This Information will provide first responders/rescuers with information they need to know if you are unconscious or incoherent or if they need to quickly evacuate you. You should keep a copy of this at your work desk, in your wallet or in your purse, and at home.

An emergency health information card should include the following information:

- name, address, phone number
- blood type
- conditions, disability
- medications (prescriptions, dosage, times taken, etc.)
- equipment you use (communication, mobility devices)
- allergies and sensitivities
- communication difficulties you may have and the best ways to communicate with you
- assistance you will need (be very specific)
- preferred treatment
- important contact people (family, doctor, etc.)

The background of the left side of the cover features a faint, light-colored architectural floor plan of a building, showing various rooms and corridors. The plan is centered and slightly tilted, with a white rectangular area highlighting a specific section of the building.

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