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Job Accommodation Network

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Accommodation and Compliance Series

Accommodation and Compliance Series: Employers' Guide to Including Employees with Disabilities in Emergency Evacuation Plans

Job Accommodation Network
PO Box 6080
Morgantown, WV 26506-6080
(800)526-7234 (V)
(877)781-9403 (TTY)
jan@askjan.org
AskJAN.org



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JAN'S Accommodation and Compliance Series

Introduction

Interest in emergency evacuation planning has increased dramatically over the last decade. The Job Accommodation Network (JAN) continues to receive calls from employers requesting information about their legal obligation to develop emergency evacuation plans and how to include employees with disabilities in such plans. This publication addresses these issues.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Although employers are not required to have emergency evacuation plans under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), if employers covered by the ADA opt to have such plans they are required to include people with disabilities. Further, employers who do not have emergency evacuation plans may nonetheless have to address emergency evacuation for employees with disabilities as a reasonable accommodation under Title I of the ADA. In addition, employers in certain industries may have obligations to develop emergency evacuation plans under the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH Act) or under state and local law.

Whether mandatory or voluntary, many employers decide to develop emergency evacuation plans. The following provides steps for including employees with disabilities in those plans.

STEPS FOR INCLUDING EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES IN EMERGENCY EVACUATION PLANNING

I. Plan Development

The first step for including employees with disabilities in emergency evacuation plans is plan development. Plan development begins with identifying accommodation needs. One of the best ways to identify accommodation needs is to ask employees whether they have limitations that might interfere with safe emergency evacuation. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has guidance that discusses what information employers are allowed to gather when developing an emergency evacuation plan. According to this guidance, there are three ways that an employer may obtain information:

- After making a job offer, but before employment begins, an employer may ask all individuals whether they will need assistance during an emergency.

- An employer also may periodically survey all of its current employees to determine whether they will require assistance in an emergency, as long as the employer makes it clear that self-identification is voluntary and explains the purpose for requesting the information.
- Finally, whether an employer periodically surveys all employees or not, it may ask employees with known disabilities if they will require assistance in the event of an emergency. An employer should not assume, however, that everyone with an obvious disability will need assistance during an evacuation. For example, many individuals who are blind may prefer to walk down stairs unassisted. People with disabilities are generally in the best position to assess their particular needs.

The ADA requires employers to keep all medical information confidential. However, first aid and safety personnel may be informed, when appropriate, if the disability might require emergency treatment or if any specific procedures are needed for emergency evacuations. You may also benefit from creating a plan of action for employees who need unique accommodations during emergencies. JAN provides [a sample plan of action](#) for you to use and modify to fit your workplace needs.

In addition to requesting information from employees, employers might want to hold mock evacuation drills to help identify needs that employees are unaware of; conduct hazard analyses to help identify hazards specific to the workplace; develop a method to identify visitors with special needs; and contact local fire, police, and HazMat departments for guidance.

Once accommodation needs have been identified, the employer should choose effective accommodation options. Often employees with disabilities are a good resource for accommodation ideas. In addition, employers should contact local fire, police, and HazMat departments to determine what services they can offer. Finally, employers can contact other resources such as JAN. JAN can provide specific accommodation ideas on a case by case basis. The following is an overview of frequently suggested accommodation ideas for emergency evacuation.

General Accommodations:

- Employers should have emergency alarms and signs showing the emergency exit routes. These alarms and signs should be accessible and maintained in proper working order.
- Employers may want to implement a "buddy system" for all employees. A buddy system involves employees working in teams so they can locate and assist each other in emergencies.

- Employers may want to designate areas of refuge. [Chapter 4: Accessible Routes](#) specifically addresses areas of rescue assistance. If these areas do not have escape routes, they should have 1) an operating phone, cell-phone, TTY, and two-way radio so that emergency services can be contacted; 2) a closing door; 3) supplies that enable individuals to block smoke from entering the room from under the door; 4) a window and something to write with (lipstick, marker) or a "help" sign to alert rescuers that people are in this location; and respirator masks.
 - Locate information on [portable TTYs](#).
 - Locate information on [respirators](#).

Motor Impairments:

- To evacuate individuals with motor impairments, employers can purchase evacuation devices. These devices help move people with motor impairments down the stairs or across rough terrain. If evacuation devices are used, personnel should be trained to operate and maintain them.
 - Locate information on [emergency evacuation devices](#).
- Employers should remove any physical barriers (boxes, supplies, furniture) to insure a barrier-free route of travel out of the building.
- Employers may want to provide heavy gloves to protect individuals' hands from debris when pushing their manual wheelchairs, a patch kit to repair flat tires, and extra batteries for those who use motorized wheelchairs or scooters. Arrangements should also be made to make wheelchairs available after evacuation.

Sensory Impairments:

- Employers should install lighted fire strobes and other visual or vibrating alerting devices to supplement audible alarms. Lighted strobes should not exceed five flashes per second due to risk of triggering seizures in some individuals. [Section 702 of the ADA Standards](#) specifically addresses alarms.
- Employers may want to provide alerting devices, vibrating paging devices, wireless communicators, or two-way paging systems to alert individuals with hearing impairments of the need to evacuate.
 - Locate information on [paging devices](#).
 - Locate information on [alerting devices](#).

- Employers should install tactile signage and maps for employees with vision impairments. Braille signage, audible directional signage, and pedestrian systems are also available. These products may benefit other people who must navigate smoke-filled exit routes.
 - Locate information on [tactile signage](#).
 - Locate information on [tactile graphics and maps](#).
- Employers may also want to provide alpha-numeric pagers or other communication devices to individuals with speech impairments so they can communicate with personnel in an emergency.
 - Locate information on [communication aids](#).

Cognitive/Psychiatric Impairments:

- Employers should consider ways of communicating with people who have cognitive impairments. For example, some individuals may benefit from pictures of buddies, color coding of escape doors and areas of rescue assistance, and information on a recorder.
- Employers should consider the effects of training for emergency evacuation. Some individuals with psychiatric impairments benefit from frequent emergency drills, but for others practice drills may trigger anxiety. Notifying employees of upcoming practice drills and allowing them to opt out of participation may be a reasonable accommodation. In this case, another form of training for emergency evacuation procedures may be needed, for example providing detailed written instructions.

After effective accommodations are chosen, employers should decide who will be involved in implementing the evacuation plan, commit the plan to writing and share it with employees for feedback, practice the plan to make sure it works, and modify the plan as needed.

II. Plan Implementation

The second step for including employees with disabilities in emergency evacuation plans is plan implementation. After the final evacuation plan is written, a copy should be distributed to all employees and key personnel. In addition, an evacuation drill should be performed to make sure all employees are familiar with the plan. Finally, the plan should be integrated into the standard operating procedures.

III. Plan Maintenance

The final step for including employees with disabilities in emergency evacuation plans is plan maintenance. To insure that accommodations continue to be effective, the

evacuation plan should be practiced and accommodations updated periodically. In addition, a system for reporting new hazards and accommodation needs should be developed; a relationship with local fire, police, and HazMat departments should be maintained; and new employees should be made aware of the plan. Finally, all accommodation equipment used in emergency evacuation should be inspected and maintained in proper working order.

CHECKLIST

I. PLAN DEVELOPMENT.

A. Identify Accommodation Needs

- Ask employees to self-identify accommodation needs for emergency evacuation and assure employees that this is voluntary and confidential.
- Complete a hazard analysis to help identify workplace hazards that may impede emergency evacuation.
- Perform sample drills to help employees identify limitations that may affect their ability to evacuate in an emergency.
- Develop a method to identify visitors with special needs.

B. Investigate Accommodation Options

- Ask employees with disabilities for their accommodation ideas.
- Consult with local fire, police, and HazMat departments.
- Explore various accommodation options for emergency evacuation.

C. Finalize the Plan

- Identify and include key personnel who will be involved in emergency evacuation.
- Conduct mock drills with key personnel.
- Commit the plan to writing.
- Make necessary modifications to the evacuation plan.

II. PLAN IMPLEMENTATION.

- Distribute a copy of the evacuation plan to all employees. (Provide alternative format.)
- Conduct practice evacuation drills.

- Integrate the evacuation plan into the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

III. PLAN MAINTENANCE.

- Develop a system for reporting new hazards and safety concerns.
- Create a procedure to identify the accommodation needs of new employees.
- Review and modify the evacuation plan after scheduled and unscheduled practice drills.
- Facilitate relationships with fire, police, and HazMat departments.
- Inspect and maintain emergency evacuation equipment.

Situations and Solutions:

As part of an emergency evacuation plan, an employer designated an area of rescue assistance.

This area included a two-way emergency radio, supplies to block smoke, a marker to write “help” on the window, and respirators.

An employer with multiple employees with vision impairments installed tactile signage and audible directional signage throughout the exit routes of the workplace.

An employee with a hearing impairment could not detect audible alarms in the workplace.

His employer added strobe lights to the audible alarms and provided a vibrating pager to alert the employee of the need to evacuate.

An office assistant with an intellectual disability became upset during emergency evacuation drills and could not remember how to evacuate the building.

The employer instituted a buddy system to help the office assistant leave the building safely.

An office worker who used a wheelchair worked on the third floor of an office building and was concerned about getting out of the building in an emergency if the elevators were not available.

His employer purchased an emergency evacuation device and trained other personnel how to use it to assist in the evacuation of the worker who used the wheelchair.

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