



# Inclusive Emergency Preparedness

Emergency planning decreases the likelihood that things will go wrong and can minimize the damages if the worst does occur. Emergency situations are dangerous, chaotic, and overwhelming for all people, regardless of ability, and these emotions can be more intense for individuals with a disability. Physical barriers, communication barriers, and even negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities can all lead to emergency planning that neglects and fails to protect the vulnerable.<sup>i</sup>

For decades, the disabilities community has said, “Nothing about us without us.”<sup>ii</sup> Including people with disabilities in the planning process is an essential way to make sure that the complexities of each person’s barriers are not overlooked and all God’s children are protected.

## Recruit a committee.

If your church or school doesn’t already have an emergency response team, assemble an emergency planning group, including persons with disabilities, to develop an inclusive emergency plan. People to involve in your emergency response team include the leadership, a safety officer, and those who oversee maintenance. Successful teams are diverse and bring together practical insights from each aspect of ministry.

## Gather information.

After you have assembled a committee, identify members with disabilities or potential visitors with disabilities. Adventist Risk Management, Inc. (ARM) has information on disability awareness, including the types of disabilities and how they relate to risk management.

Announce the committee’s goals to the church, inviting persons with disabilities and their caretakers to contact the committee, keeping in mind communication barriers. Give persons with disabilities the opportunity to opt in, identify themselves, and give information about their respective needs. This information will be useful in pairing persons with disabilities with escorts prepared to offer adequate help in terms of physical and communication barriers.



With this information, you can assess how emergency notification methods can be improved to serve people with certain disabilities. The next phase involves recruiting members or caretakers who will serve as escorts for persons with disabilities. These escorts will be prepared to communicate with the person assigned to them, get them to safety, and provide adequate support during evacuation or shelter-in-place.

### Create a working plan.

After you have identified and paired the persons with disabilities and their escorts, divide the committee into members responsible for shelter-in-place planning and those responsible for evacuation planning. Each group should draft a plan, making sure to address both physical and communication barriers.

Regarding communication barriers, each group should ask if the exit routes are clearly marked. For example, there should be braille or screen readers for persons who are visually impaired. If you have someone fluent in manual interpretation (or sign language), discuss with them how they can serve in an emergency. Have printed versions of your emergency plans with diagrams and pictures for those with hearing impairment who cannot hear verbal instructions, and include large text and simple sentences for those with visual or cognitive impairments.

In any emergency situation, having multiple exit routes is important to ease the flow of egress and to provide options if the primary route is blocked. It is equally important to make sure you have more than one exit route that is accessible. To minimize confusion, exit routes should be clearly marked to indicate whether they are accessible or not.

Each respective escort or caretaker must survey any equipment or backup equipment necessary for persons with disabilities. This could be extra batteries for wheelchairs or oxygen tanks.

Both groups should address the location of triage and reunification. The committee should also appoint an officer in charge of triage and reunification, ensuring that each person with a disability is properly reunited with their family. This officer would have access to all contact numbers of family and caretakers. It is also important for the first aid response team to be prepared to adjust to any special needs that emerge if injuries occur. Finally, establish procedures that will assure reunification.

### Practice with the congregation.

First, perform tabletop drills for shelter-in-place and evacuation with the committee. That way, you can troubleshoot and adjust any essential steps. Assess the alarm system and its ability to address communication barriers. Next, assess the speed and ease of evacuation and shelter-in-place procedures.

Once the majority of the bugs are worked out, run the drill with the entire congregation. This will require a lot of planning and communication before and during the drill so your congregation will know what to expect and how to respond. At the end of the drill, assess the efficiency and effectiveness of response and reunification. <sup>iii</sup>

i *Disability and Health Overview*. (2020). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved November 20, 2021, from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>

ii Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery. (2018). Introduction. In *FIVE ACTIONS FOR DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT*.

iii Mitchum, Naomi. (n.d.) *Include Disability Issues in Your Emergency Plan*. Naomi Mitchum. <https://www.naomimitchum.com/emergency-planning/include-disability-issues-in-your-emergency-plan/>



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