



**Hartnell College**  
**Department of Supportive Programs & Services**

## **Assisting Persons with Disabilities in an Emergency**

During a disaster we might all be called upon to help members of our college community who have disabilities. These are some easy-to-remember tips about how to offer help, and specifics for helping in the event of an emergency.

### **Guidelines for Evacuating Persons with Disabilities**

**Always ask how you can help before attempting any assistance or rescue. Ask how the person can best be moved and whether there are any special considerations or items that need to come with the person.**

#### **Hearing Impairments**

- Flick the lights when entering the room to get the person's attention.
- Establish eye contact with the individual, even if an interpreter is present.
- Face the light, do not cover or turn your face away, or chew gum.
- Use facial expressions and hand gestures as visual cues.
- Offer visual instructions to advise of safest route or direction by pointing towards exits.
- Check to see if you have been understood and repeat if necessary.
- Offer pencil and paper. Write slowly and let the individual read as you write. In an emergency, written communication may be especially important if you are unable to understand the individual's speech.
- Be patient, the individual may have difficulty comprehending the urgency of your message.
- In an emergency, if possible, provide the individual with a flashlight for signaling their location in the event that they are separated from the rescuing team or buddy and to facilitate speech-reading in the dark.

#### **Mobility Impairments**

- Someone using a crutch or a cane might be able to negotiate stairs independently. One hand is used to grasp the handrail; the other hand is used for the crutch or cane. It is best *not* to interfere with this person's movement.
- You might be of assistance by offering to carry the extra crutch while exiting.
- Help clear the exit route of debris so the floor is clear for wheelchairs or persons using other mobility aids.
- In an emergency evacuation situation, stairways and halls can be crowded, if so, you can act as a buffer and "run interference."
- Be sure the person has their crutches, canes, walkers or other mobility devices with them.

## **Evacuating persons who are non-ambulatory**

- Attempt a rescue evacuation **only** if you have had rescue training unless the situation is life threatening. Some persons may have such minimal mobility that lifting them may be dangerous.
- Not all persons can move from their wheelchairs and be carried safely.
- Most wheelchair users are trained in special techniques to transfer from one chair to another. Depending on their upper body strength, they may be able to do much of the work themselves.
- If you assist a wheelchair user, avoid putting pressure on the person's extremities and chest. Such pressure might cause spasms, pain and even restrict breathing.
- If you have to lift a wheelchair user out of their chair to carry them, please be aware that carrying someone slung over your shoulders (like the "fireman's carry") is like sitting on their chest and poses danger for individuals who fall within categories of neurological and orthopedic disabilities. Note the location of the wheelchair and upon exiting the building immediately inform Campus Safety of the location of the wheelchair so they can retrieve it. The wheelchair is essential to the person's mobility and safety.
- The college currently has an Evacuation Chair which is stored in the DSPS office, CALL Building room 102 (inside DSPS Lab).

## **Blindness or Visual Impairment**

- Tell the person the nature of the emergency and offer to guide him/her by offering your left/right elbow. Do not grab a visually impaired person's arm, or push their body.
- Speak naturally and directly to the individual. Do not shout.
- Offer assistance but let the person explain what help is needed.
- Describe the action to be taken in advance.
- Be sure the person brings with them all mobility tools such as canes.

If leading someone:

- Let them grasp your arm or shoulder lightly, for guidance. He/she may choose to walk slightly behind you to gauge your body reactions to obstacles; be sure to mention, stairs, doorways, narrow passages, ramps, overhanging objects, uneven pavements, etc.
- Never "move" the blind person, or touch or move their cane.
- When guiding to a seat, place the person's hand on the back of the chair.
- When you have reached a safe location, orient the person to where she/he is and ask if any further assistance is needed.

## **Psychological Impairments**

- A person with a psychological disability may have difficulty processing emergency warnings and alerts or difficulty focusing on instructions under duress.
- Speak calmly yet with authority when providing directions.
- Ask them to focus on their breathing, slowly and deeply to aid them to be calmer.
- Explain that others are feeling anxious and fearful also and everyone will work together, if possible escort the individual to a point of safe harbor/assembly area.

## **Suggestions When Assisting Owners of Service Dogs**

- Do not pet or offer the dog food without the permission of the owner.
- When the dog is wearing its harness, he is on duty; if you want the dog not to guide its owner, have the person remove the dog's harness.
- Plan for the dog to be evacuated with the owner.
- In the event you are asked to take the dog while assisting the individual, it is recommended that you (the helper) hold the leash and not the dog's harness.
- The Service Dog might become disoriented, ask the advice of the dog's partner regarding your level of assistance.

## **Respiratory Disorders**

- With respiratory disorders, such as asthma or emphysema, the onset of symptoms can be triggered by stress, exertion, or exposure to small amounts of dust or smoke.
- Remind the individual to bring inhalation medication when evacuating.

## **Cardiac conditions**

- Persons with cardiac conditions, should be reminded to take their medications when evacuating.
- Offer them assistance in walking; they may have reduced stamina and require frequent rest periods.

## **Pregnancy**

Not usually considered a disability, it can result in reduced stamina or impaired mobility, especially in negotiating stairs in an evacuation.

- Offer to walk with the woman and be of support both emotionally and physically.
- Remain with her until you have reached safety and she has a safe, warm place to sit.