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# FACT SHEET

## Emergency Evacuation: Safe Egress of Persons with Disabilities from Transit Systems

*Prepared by Easter Seals Project ACTION with Elizabeth Davis, Director of the National Organization on Disability's Emergency Preparedness Initiative September 2004*

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandates that passengers with and without disabilities have equal access to public transportation vehicles. A passenger with a disability also has the same right to safe egress from that vehicle during an emergency. Transit agencies and passengers with disabilities (and those who accompany people with disabilities) share a responsibility to be aware of passenger safety in the case of an emergency evacuation. There are several important steps and strategies for effective emergency preparedness and response.

During an emergency evacuation many passengers may need additional assistance, such as those who do not speak English or people who are panicked and confused. Effective emergency preparedness and planning for passengers with disabilities benefits *all* passengers.

This fact sheet on safe egress will provide information on:

- **Tips for transit agencies:**
  - **Planning for safe evacuation**
  - **What to do during an emergency**
  - **What to do after an emergency**
- **Tips for people with disabilities**
- **Additional resources**

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## For Transit Agencies

### *Planning for Safe Evacuation*

**Collaborate with others.** Work with disability advocates, human service providers and individual passengers with disabilities during planning, training and follow-up assessment of safe evacuation procedures.

**Check equipment and facilities.** Examine each type of transit station/stop and vehicle to determine if critical safety and evacuation elements (e.g., lighting, communication systems, emergency graphics and signage, areas of rescue assistance) will meet the safe egress needs of people with disabilities.

**Consider extra equipment.** Examine whether additional emergency equipment is needed to assist with rapid evacuation of passengers with disabilities, including those who may have become temporarily disabled in an emergency.

**Plan for all passengers.** Write and maintain one emergency response plan for all passengers rather than a separate, additional plan to address their needs for safe egress. Effective emergency preparedness and planning for passengers with disabilities benefits *all* passengers.

**Identify equipment.** Emergency procedures should include a list of evacuation-related equipment along with instructions on its location and use.

**Keep lists updated.** Review and upgrade emergency checklists and response strategies on a regular basis, including times that follow drills, system or station modifications, accidents and related events.

**Train continuously.** All evacuation procedures should be backed by a full and continuous training program that incorporates the needs of people with disabilities into every aspect of emergency preparedness and response. This training should include information on use and handling of emergency equipment.

**Involve all employees.** Personnel training should involve all levels of employees and staff as anyone can be called on to assist during an emergency; i.e., conductors, station attendants, rail officers, motor operators, etc.

**Inform and educate.** Develop and institute a public information and education program to help passengers with disabilities understand their role in self-protection in a transit emergency.

**Have alternative communication options.** Provide means for transit personnel to communicate with passengers with disabilities. Paper/pencils and pictograph cards may be used to communicate with passengers who cannot speak or understand spoken language.

**Meet with others on safety.** Initiate regular meetings with local safety organizations to discuss emergency preparedness and response. These meetings can provide a good opportunity to address provision and coordination of emergency services for passengers with disabilities.

### *During an Emergency*

**Be clear.** Take all possible steps to assure that clear, authoritative information is provided to all passengers in an emergency situation.

**Watch the passengers.** Use observation skills to assess if any passengers are unable to hear and comprehend instructions, communicate their needs, and/or perform required evacuation tasks. These passengers may need additional assistance.

**Make announcements.** At the time of the emergency, transit personnel should make announcements requesting those passengers who anticipate difficulty evacuating to identify themselves to transit officials, emergency personnel or a fellow passenger.

**Identify yourself.** When addressing passengers in an emergency, transit personnel should identify themselves as a member of the transit staff and state their name and position.

**Never assume.** Do not make assumptions about the abilities of any passenger, with or without a visible disability, to act, or not act, in an emergency situation. It is not necessary to diagnose a passenger's disability – as with anyone, determine what assistance he or she will need to evacuate safely.

**It's OK to ask.** Ask passengers if they need help and what is the best way to assist them as they will be able to self-direct and help personnel help them.

**And ask again.** Do not indicate that you understand a passenger's speech if you do not; repeat what you thought she said back to her to be clear. When you respond with direction, restate as often as necessary until the passenger understands what she needs to do in order to safely evacuate.

### *After an Emergency*

**Remember the passenger's equipment.** Recognize that some people with a disability may have left assistive equipment behind and that it might need to be recovered if possible or alternative aid may need to be provided; e.g., if a wheelchair is left behind, one will need to be provided in the safe area. Also, some individuals may need help reuniting with traveling companions or personal assistants.

**Connect passengers with help.** Be sure that in the safe area, people with disabilities are connected to emergency professionals who can better assist with their new needs.

**Make sure arriving equipment is accessible.** If another form of transportation is brought in to remove passengers to a safe area; e.g., busses, be sure the alternative transportation is also accessible.

**Reassure and assist.** For individuals with cognitive disabilities, personnel may need to provide reassurance and assistance if that person's travel plans have now changed. For someone with low or no vision, personnel may need to help the person navigate to the safe area outside the transit vehicle itself, as this is new terrain.

**Leave no one behind.** Personnel must be sure not to inadvertently "strand" anyone with disabilities and be sure that passengers can reach their original or new destination.

## **For Passengers with Disabilities**

**Prepare yourself.** Assess and know your capabilities and needs beforehand to determine what type of help you may need in an emergency. You share responsibility with your transit authority for your own self-protection and safety.

**Explain your needs to personnel.** Be prepared to give clear, specific and concise instructions to transit and emergency personnel on how they can best assist you without causing injury.

**Locate the emergency features.** As a usual practice, always identify emergency exits, fire alarms and extinguishers, and emergency instructions on transit vehicles. Be aware of your ability to make use of these tools and know if you may need assistance in doing so.

**Carry an emergency list.** Always have with you information that will alert rescuers to what they need to know if you are unconscious or unable to communicate during an emergency (list of current medications, allergies, special equipment, names, addresses, and telephone numbers of doctors, pharmacies, family members, friends, and any other important information).

**Supply yourself.** Be prepared for emergencies by traveling with supplies such as essential medication, small flashlight, paper and pencil and cell phone.

**Consider your service animal.** Understand that a service animal may become confused, panicked, frightened or disoriented during an emergency and may not be able to work. In extreme conditions it may be necessary to leave the animal in a safe place and use alternative methods of negotiating your environment.

**Help others.** You may be able to help others in an emergency evacuation. Consider how (i.e. guiding people to and through darkened spaces and exits if you have no or low vision, offering calming and emotional support, etc.) you can assist in an emergency.

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## **Additional Resources:**

**“Equal Access to Safe Egress” By Katherine McGuinness and Associates Inc.; published by Easter Seals Project ACTION, Washington, D.C. (1994)**

This comprehensive report describes safe and efficient emergency evacuation procedures for passengers with disabilities from rapid transit rail systems. Use of these strategies can significantly increase the safety of passengers with disabilities in an emergency evacuation. Find online at [www.projectaction.org](http://www.projectaction.org)

**“Emergency Evacuation Preparedness: Taking Responsibility for Your Safety – A Guide for People with Disabilities and Other Activity Limitations.” By June Isaacson Kailes, The Center for Disability Issues and the Health Professions, Western University of Health Sciences, Pomona, Calif. (2002)**

This guide is for people with disabilities wanting to prepare for large- and small-scale emergencies. It includes self-assessment checklists and information on evacuation options. Find online at [www.cdihp.org/evacuationpdf.htm](http://www.cdihp.org/evacuationpdf.htm)

**Web site: Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI) – [www.nod.org/emergency](http://www.nod.org/emergency)**

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) launched the Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI) to ensure that emergency managers address disability concerns and that people with disabilities are included in the emergency planning process. The EPI site includes bulletin board, bibliography of related research, a products and services directory and video clips.

**Web site: FTA Safety and Security – <http://transit-safety.volpe.dot.gov/>**

An online resource of transit safety information that includes effective transit practices with initial emphasis on safety and security.