

Emergency Planning and Evacuation in Places of Lodging:

Including People with Disabilities

Hotels, inns, and other places of lodging have always maintained high standards for emergency preparedness. Like hospitals, shelters, and other types of facilities where people stay overnight, efficient evacuation in places of lodging can be especially challenging. People may be bathing or sleeping when an emergency occurs. Guests in places of temporary lodging are probably not as familiar with their surroundings as they may be in other settings, and the population of the facility changes on a daily basis!

It is critical that planning, information dissemination, and response efforts take into consideration the potential needs of people with all types of disabilities.

Guest Rooms: Accessibility and Dispersion

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Standards for Accessible Design establish minimum requirements for accessible guest rooms, based on the total number of rooms in a facility. There are two types of accessible guest rooms – rooms designed for individuals with mobility disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs, and rooms equipped for individuals with hearing disabilities. Both types of accessible guest rooms must be dispersed among the various classes of rooms offered in the facility. Guests with disabilities should have choices comparable to the choices available to other patrons.

Most places of lodging offer at least some variety of room types, such as rooms with different numbers or sizes of beds, or smoking and non-smoking rooms. Some facilities offer a wider range of options, such as suites with hot tubs, kitchens, or other amenities. Guests who need accessible features should have the opportunity to take advantage of these options.

Facility designers and operators have sometimes been hesitant to place people with mobility disabilities on upper floors because of concerns about emergency evacuation, but there are many reasons guests with disabilities want to stay on upper floors, just as other guests do. Upper floors are often quieter, and regarded as more secure than the ground floor. Concierge floors or other exclusive amenities are often located on upper stories. Breathtaking panoramic views of the local city skyline or natural scenery may be available from the heights. Individuals may be participating in an event associated with a room block (for example, a wedding), where multiple parties of guests want their rooms clustered in close proximity to one another, often near a special room or suite which may be located on an upper story.

Concerns about evacuation may be sincere, but the solutions lie in inclusion, not exclusion. Comprehensive planning and preparation, taking the needs of diverse populations into consideration, will help everyone respond more effectively in a crisis.

ADA Standards and Egress

The 2010 ADA Standards refer to the International Building Code (IBC) for many requirements related to emergency egress. Some newly constructed multi-story buildings will be required to install evacuation

elevators rather than traditional elevators. Evacuation elevators have standby power and other safety features and can continue operating during an emergency evacuation.

Areas of refuge, which are spaces with special construction features that offer fire and smoke resistance and communication systems that enable individuals to register a call for help, may be required in some newly constructed multi-story buildings that are not equipped with supervised sprinkler systems or evacuation elevators. Areas of refuge are often located on stairway landings, but can be created in other spaces.

There are also requirements for structural communication elements, such as signs related to emergency egress. Signs designating exits must have tactile features (raised and Braille characters), and signs that provide direction or information should have features that make them easy to read, such as simple lettering, non-glare finishes, and good contrast between characters and background.

The ADA Standards also require that all common spaces, such as corridors, lobbies, restaurants and lounges, public restrooms, and meeting rooms, as well as each of the guest rooms designed to be accessible for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, be equipped with a visual alert device to complement the audible alarm in facilities with emergency alarm systems.

Information and Communication

Making sure that guests have information about emergency procedures of course goes beyond structural features. Places of lodging often provide maps and other information about the facility within guest rooms and common spaces, and may offer some orientation to guests upon check-in. This information must be conveyed effectively to individuals with disabilities, and alternate methods may sometimes be needed. Printed materials might be provided in other formats, such as large print or Braille, for guests who are blind or have low vision. Additional orientation, describing in detail the location of exits or other features, may be helpful.

TIPS FOR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS IN PLACES OF LODGING

- Make plans; take the time to assess your facility and your procedures.
- Remember that fire is only one type of emergency; learn about what to do in case of other types of natural or man-made disasters and emergencies that may occur (earthquakes, hurricanes, chemical spills, etc.).
- Train staff at all levels; every employee should know what to do in an emergency.
- Practice. Practice reinforces staff training and boosts confidence (there's a reason it's called a "drill"); practice also helps to identify and address glitches in the system.
- Communicate with your local responders; make sure they know about any unique features (location of areas of refuge, etc.) or needs you may have.

- Connect with your community. Learn about local resources and agencies, including those that serve people with disabilities, such as “special needs” shelters or disability-related organizations.
- Remember that service animals are not pets, and should rarely, even in emergencies, be left behind or separated from the individuals they serve.
- Remember that guests and employees may have “hidden” disabilities you don’t know about, such as epilepsy, intellectual disabilities, or health conditions. Sensitivity in times of stress may be challenging, but more important than ever.

For more information, visit the [ADA National Network Hospitality Initiative: Resources for Emergency Preparedness and Evacuation](http://adahospitality.org/content/Emergency-Preparedness-Evacuation) (<http://adahospitality.org/content/Emergency-Preparedness-Evacuation>), or call your regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232 V/TTY with questions about any aspect of the ADA.