

Spontaneous Assistance Techniques

When assisting persons with disabilities in emergency situations, there are some basic rules to follow in order to be effective, and we hope that these brief guidelines will better assist you to help those in need.

Vision Impairments

- Announce your presence; speak out when entering the work area.
- Speak naturally and directly to the individual and not through a third party. Do not shout.
- Don't be afraid to use words like "see," "look," or "blind."
- Offer assistance but let the person explain what help is needed.
- Describe the action to be taken in advance.
- Let the individual 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 passage, ramps, etc.
- When guiding to a seat, place the person's hand on the back of the chair.
- If leading several individuals with visual impairments at the same time, ask to hold each other's hands.
- You should ensure that after exiting the building those individuals with impaired vision are not abandoned but are led to a place of safety, where a colleague(s) should remain with them until the emergency is over. Another of the lessons learned from the World Trade Center incident involved the complaints of blind tenants who after being escorted down and out of the building, were unceremoniously left in the unfamiliar environs out-of-doors in the midst of a winter ice storm, where they had to negotiate ice covered sidewalks and falling glass from overhead.

Suggestions When Assisting Owners of Dog Guides

- 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.

Hearing Impairments

- Flick the lights when entering the work area 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, and never chew gum.
- Use facial expressions and hand gestures as visual cues.
- 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. Written communication may be especially important if you are unable to understand the individual's speech.
- Do not allow others to interrupt or joke with you while conveying the emergency information.
- Be patient, the individual may have difficulty comprehending the urgency of your message.
- 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 lip-reading in the dark.

Learning Disabilities

- Persons with learning disabilities may have difficulty in recognizing or being motivated to act in an emergency by untrained rescuers. They may also have difficulty in responding to instructions that involve more than a small number of simple actions.
- Their visual perception of written instructions or signs may be confused.
- Their sense of direction may be limited, requiring someone to accompany them.
- Directions or information may need to be broken down into simple steps. Be patient.
- Simple signals and/or symbols should be used (e.g., the graphics used Throughout this section).
- A person's ability to understand speech is often more developed than His/her own vocabulary. Do not talk about a person to others in front of Him/her.
- The individual should be treated as an adult who happens to have a cognitive or learning disability. Do not talk down to them or treat them as children.

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. Here, it is best NOT to interfere with this person's movement. You might be of assistance by offering to carry the extra crutch. Also, if the stairs are crowded, you can act as a buffer and "run interference."
- 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 of the person's extremities and chest. Such pressure might cause spasms, pain and even restrict breathing. Carrying someone slung over your shoulders (something like the so called fireman's carry) is like sitting on their chest and poses danger for several individuals who fall within categories of neuralgic and orthopedic disabilities.