



CAMPUS FIRE SAFETY CODE TALK

Campus Fire Safety e-NewZone

"One is never served so well as by oneself."

Charles-Guillaume Étienne

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Charles-Guillaume Étienne (January 5, 1778 - March 13, 1845) was a French dramatist and miscellaneous writer. In *Bruis et Palaprat*, published in 1807, Étienne penned the phrase, "On n'est jamais servi si bien que par soi-même.", which has been widely translated as, "If you want something done right, do it yourself.", although the literal translation, which I like better, is, "One is never served so well as by oneself." (Charles-Guillaume Étienne, n.d.)

This statement has never been truer than when it comes to evacuations, small, medium, large or catastrophic, especially for people with disabilities!

Human factors play an important role in residential building fire fatalities and of course, college dormitories are residential buildings. According to the U.S. Fire Administration National Fire Data Center, the leading human factor contributing to fatalities is being "asleep," which was responsible for 48 percent of fire fatalities.¹ This finding is not unexpected as the largest numbers of fatalities per fatal fire occur during the seven-hour period between midnight and 7 a.m.

The second leading human factor contributing to fatalities, at 25 percent, is "physically disability."

Disability is not about a specific group of people, but rather a specific time in life for all of us. For some, it may be short term and temporary; for others, it may last much longer. As a society, we have mistakenly adopted a mindset that divides people into two groups, the "able-bodied" and the "disabled." The fact is that we will all be part of the disabled community at some time in our lives. Break your leg and you have a disability. Chronic asthma? You have a disability. You get the point. It is from that perspective that we need to regulate our programs and our built environment, from sky scrapers to dorm rooms.



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That can be a very big problem when it comes to emergencies! If official evacuation plans are inadequate, by default it falls on the individual to devise a plan to fit his or her specific needs. We all need to change the way we think about evacuation so that we can build evacuation plans based on our individual needs. It is critically important that everyone, regardless of his or her circumstances, be personally prepared to take action during an emergency.

Two recent ground breaking federal lawsuits have resulted in Los Angeles (Kim, 2011) and New York City (Weiser, 2013) being held accountable for not fulfilling their responsibilities to plan and execute evacuations for people with disabilities. The required corrections may not be timely for the next major event and maybe not even feasible at all. And those are major cities. Imagine the situation in small communities.

We need to change our mindset and we need to start right now, here today!!

In their report *Summary of Findings: Waldo Canyon Fire Forum for People with Disabilities*, Colorado Springs, CO August 30, 2012, the authors, Patricia Yeager, Ph.D., and Jana Burke, Ph.D., write about their findings after the fire. This may be the first solid insight into what people with disabilities are saying that they need to prepare for and implement a safe evacuation. They wrote:

“It is also important to note that nearly everyone who spoke mentioned that either they did not know what they were supposed to do or did not have a plan in place, indicating a need for training at the individual level. There seemed to be a lack of understanding as to what the disaster plan was from the government-what were individuals expected to do. Due to the scope and impact of the Waldo Canyon Fire, input from the community of people with disabilities indicates the disaster can serve as a learning experience for everyone involved.”

It is a relatively straightforward process to prepare yourself for an emergency requiring you to evacuate your home, office, school or any other building or facility or area although it will require some work. You need to know the right questions to ask, who you should ask those questions of, how to document the answers, and then you



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need to routinely practice your evacuation making modifications as conditions change. It doesn't matter whether it's a small waste basket fire or a massive wild land fire, we all need to be prepared.

One way to prepare yourself is by using NFPA's [*Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities*](#), published in 2007 to help people with disabilities—and everyone else—build, understand, and practice what they need to do to get themselves out in the event of an emergency, or at least closer to getting out. The guide provides questions about your needs, criteria, and minimum information necessary based on the specific emergency. It provides the framework to integrate the proper planning components for those people with a disability, or anyone, into a comprehensive evacuation planning strategy for those with mobility, visual, hearing, speech, and cognitive impairments.

If you wait for first responders—they may not know where you are or what they need to do to help you—you may not survive.

As the late Bill Scott, former chair of NFPA's Disability Access Review and Advisory Committee (DARAC), said, "All people, regardless of their circumstances, have some obligation to be prepared to take action during an emergency and to assume some responsibility for their own safety."

Two hundred and eight years ago Charles-Guillaume Étienne penned the same point, "One is never served so well as by oneself." Empower yourself. Plan and practice your own emergency evacuation plan. It only takes a little time, but it may well save your life. We must all learn to "Serve ourselves."

Works Cited

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