



## We Have the Power

*By: Allan B. Fraser, CBI, CPCA, Senior Building Code Specialist, NFPA*

**B**ill Scott, founder and CEO of Abilities Unlimited, Inc. and Chair of NFPA's Disability Access and Review Advisory Committee (DARAC) has a wonderful mantra, "Regardless of our circumstances, we all have some responsibility for our own safety." This is a particularly important piece of advice for college students and their families.

My wife and I are the proud parents of four children, three of whom have already experienced the major life changing experience of going off to college. With all of them, we did our best to make sure that they had a solid understanding of fire and life safety issues and had the tools they'd need should they ever need them. We started preparing them, step by step, from the first day they went to kindergarten, because these tools and skills need to be built and practiced consistently over time.

As parents, we can't just "drop them off at college" any more than we can "drop them off at kindergarten." We need to advocate, and to fight when necessary, for our children until they can take care of themselves. Our role in that diminishes over time, but it is not done when they go off to college. In fact, I would argue that it should actually ramp up quite a bit as this transition really is huge. I remember attending an education seminar about ten years ago where one line by the presenter forever changed the way I try to relate to my children. He said, "We were never their age"

and he was so right. I didn't have to deal with all the things they did and do. Things like digital technology, drugs, stalking, texting and hundreds, if not thousands of other challenges that didn't even exist when I went to college.

It's even more important for students with disabilities and their families to actively advocate for their rights, particularly when it comes to their safety. I received an e-mail about a college in Canada a short time ago that greatly disturbed me. While I am sure those responsible for the plan meant well, it really scares me. Such a plan would be illegal in the United States under the ADA which mandates equal treatment for everyone. If we plan to evacuate some, we **MUST** evacuate everyone!

*"Regardless of our circumstances, we all have some responsibility for our own safety."*

"At one University in Canada they have developed a "Protect in Place" Program to compliment their "Evacuation Safe Destination" Program and describe it this way:

*Since forever, we have known that there is a constituency on our campus that, in the event of an evacuation emergency, just can't leave. We sometimes told people to go to the top of a stairwell and wait for help, or go to the elevator lobby and wait for help, but for the most part there was little engagement of the persons directly involved and affected.*

*Some years ago the National Research Council (NRC) put together an incident follow up discovery group on evacuation, following several injuries and fatalities during a false alarm evacuation in a building that was primarily occupied by seniors and persons with limited, or no, unassisted mobility. Their findings provided a conclusion that more needed to be done to provide safe options for persons with restricted mobility. From this we consulted with all of our campus 'stakeholders' (students with disabilities, Attendant Care Services, staff, etc.) and other resources in the Office of the Fire Marshal, NFPA, the NRC, and similar programs in the United States.*

*The plan is called "Protect in Place" and it is included in the Departmental Evacuation Plans along with their specific Evacuation Safe Destination information. We have trained our Fire Safety Warden network and our Building Authorities in the programs to promote within their respective groups, and options for them to assist in the timeliness and efficiencies of the programs.*

The plan goes on to describe the criteria to achieve this goal and it includes things like providing compartmentation and communication to emergency center from the protect in place location, self identification as well as providing information to first responders for the location of those left in the building. The plan also includes much discussion on public education and information sharing between campus authorities and the individual with the mobility impairment. While some elements of this approach are important regardless of the strategy employed, the basic concept of the *protect in place plan*, although well intentioned, would seem to miss the point. Asking some building occupants to wait around while others are evacuating is no longer an acceptable practice in today's society.

FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate is changing the way FEMA does business from top to bottom with the charge that FEMA must "Plan for real, not for easy!" In my opinion "Protect in Place" isn't a

good plan, it's an easy one-and for many people who can not self evacuate, it is becoming less acceptable.

NFPA developed its *Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities* to empower people with disabilities, their families, friends, caregivers, building managers and anyone else who needs it, the power to plan for and practice evacuating from any building they may be in during multiple types of events so that they too can get out just like everyone else. You can not assume that someone else will take care of you. You have to plan and practice in advance. During the event it's too late to figure out what to do.

College campuses and facilities, like any office building, movie theatre, apartment building or store must allow for free and unfettered access to, and barrier free use within, the array of buildings found in the college/university environment. Likewise, having a robust plan to evacuate students, faculty or visitors who may have a disability from these buildings cannot be an afterthought. It must part of your advanced emergency planning.

NFPA's *Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities* is available as a free download for non-commercial use. [Just click here.](#)

<http://www.nfpa.org/categoryList.asp?categoryID=824&URL=Safety%20Information/For%20consumers/Populations/People%20with%20disabilities>

