



CAMPUS FIRE SAFETY CODE TALK

Campus Fire Safety e-NewZone

Are We Ignoring 20 Percent of Our Population When We Plan for Evacuations?

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Human factors play an important role in residential building fire fatalities and of course, college dorms are residential buildings. According to the NFPA report, "[Human Factors Contributing to Fatal Injury Based on NFIRS 5.0 Field in Civilian Casualty Module](#)" by Ben Evarts, June 2011, the leading human factor contributing is being "asleep" which is responsible for 30% of fatalities in home fires. The second leading human factors contributing to fatalities, is tied at 14 percent for "physically disabled" and for alcohol or drug impairment.

Disability is not about a specific group of people, but rather a specific time in the life for all of us. For some, it may be 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, and it is from that perspective that we need to regulate our programs and our built environment, from sky scrapers to dorm rooms.

On October 10, 2013, the United Nations released a survey of nearly 6,000 persons with disabilities in 126 countries that asked how they coped with, and prepared for, disasters.² The survey concluded that "a high proportion of persons with disabilities die or suffer injuries during disasters because they are rarely consulted about their needs and governments lack adequate measures to address them."

According to Margareta Wahlström, the head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, only 20 percent of respondents said they could evacuate immediately without difficulty, while 6 percent said they would not be able to evacuate at all. The remainder said they would be able to evacuate with a degree of difficulty.

These results become even more distressing when one considers the fact that we are 10 times more likely to die in a small fire than in a major disaster. During the 24 most costly natural disasters that occurred in the United States between 1970 and



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2006, a total of 9,494 people died. During that same period, 112,320 people in the United States died as a result of building fires.

The UN survey also noted that a disproportionate number of persons with disabilities suffer and die in disasters because their needs are ignored or neglected during the official planning process in the majority of situations. This lack of inclusion results in systems that are inadequate, leaving many people with disabilities to depend largely on friends and family for safety—if they have friends or family. Only 31 percent of the respondents said that they always have someone to help them evacuate, while 13 percent said they never have anyone to help them. The survey also shows that 71 percent of respondents have no personal preparedness plan for evacuation.

And that's a problem. If the official evacuation plans are inadequate, it falls on the individual to devise a plan to fit his or her specific needs. Federal, state, local governments and building managers are only half of the solution when it comes to an evacuation, particularly for those with disabilities. The other half is changing the way we think about evacuation so that we can build evacuation plans based on the needs of the individuals who will be occupying a building or area. It is critically important that everyone, regardless of his or her circumstances, be personally prepared to take action during an emergency.

One way to do that is by using NFPA's [*Emergency Evacuation Planning Guide for People with Disabilities*](#), published in 2007 to help people with disabilities—and the able-bodied, too—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 addresses the needs, criteria, and minimum information necessary to integrate the proper planning components for the disabled community into a comprehensive evacuation planning strategy for those with mobility, visual, hearing, speech, and cognitive impairments. The Guide can be applied to classroom settings, dormitories, field house—essentially any building found on the campus environment.



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If you wait for first responders—who may not even know where you are or what they need to do to help you—you may not survive. We must all assume some responsibility for our own safety.

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."

Empower yourself. Plan and practice your own emergency evacuation plan. It only takes a little time, but it may well save your life.

Works Cited

1. NFPA [*Human Factors Contributing to Fatal Injury Based on NFIRS 5.0 Field in Civilian Casualty Module*](#), 2011
2. *UN global survey explains why so many people living with disabilities die in disasters*. (2013, October 10). Retrieved from UNISDR: <http://www.unisdr.org/archive/35032>

