

Environmental Health and Safety Update

Evacuating Physically Impaired Individuals

Overview

Individuals with permanent disabilities, and those with temporary physical conditions that restrict their ability to walk, may require special assistance during fire emergencies or evacuations. Some examples of conditions that may require assistance are:

- **Permanent Disabilities:** Includes individuals who are partially paralyzed, blind, or paraplegic.
- **Mobility restricted due to medical condition:** Includes individuals with permanent or temporary medical conditions such as severe respiratory condition, obesity, heart condition, pregnancy, conditions of the ankle, leg, knee, foot or hip, stroke and neurological conditions.

This update provides guidance on evaluating and utilizing the best method to assist those individuals who require help evacuating during fire alarm activations, fire or smoke conditions, or other emergencies.

Applicability

This update applies to all Weill Cornell Medical College (WCMC) employees working in any College owned or leased facility.

Responsibilities

WCMC Departments – Be familiar with the methods available to assist occupants with physical limitations or disabilities during fire emergencies and evacuation. Evaluate their respective individual work areas to identify areas of refuge that are appropriate and compliant with this update.

Supervisors – Assemble an adequate number of staff members to act as “buddies” who are assigned to assist WCMC staff with physical limitations or disabilities during fire emergencies and evacuation. Ensure that these individuals are familiar with the methods of assisting the physically challenged described in this update, and practice these techniques as needed to ensure competency. Assign additional staff to be responsible for knowing the whereabouts of staff and transient occupants in the work area on a daily basis who are physically limited or disabled.

Environmental Health and Safety – Develop and revise this update and provide technical guidance with the methods described in this document.

Procedure

There are several methods recommended for assisting the physically challenged during fires, smoke conditions, fire alarm activations or other emergencies that may require the vertical evacuation of occupants. Before attempting to assist, especially where lifting is involved, the individual performing the assist must know their own physical capabilities and limitations. If you are unsure, enlist additional assistance.

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Evacuation Methods

The suggested methods, in order from most desirable to least desirable are:

1. **Relocation to an area of refuge** – Move the occupant to a predetermined area of refuge that provides shelter and protection from exposure to smoke until emergency response personnel can arrive and vertically transport the occupant to safety. The area of refuge must have a telephone or other means of communication (i.e. dedicated emergency telephone to lobby, wireless radio). A buddy must remain with the occupant at all times. The area of refuge could be an office, conference room, enclosed elevator lobby, stairway (if constructed with oversized landing), or any room with a door that can be sealed to keep out smoke.
2. **Shelter-in-place** – Remain in place awaiting assistance from emergency response personnel (note a buddy must remain with the occupant at all times). It is most desirable to move the occupant outside the entrance to the nearest and unaffected fire exit. Let lobby security or 911 know where you are and that you require rescue. This method can only be utilized if there is no smoke or condition that poses an immediate danger to health or safety.
3. **Evacuation requiring minor assistance** – Provide a steadying hand to those individuals who have minor limitations, such as the elderly, to provide balance and confidence as they descend down the stairs.
4. **Evacuation requiring carrying or major assistance** – Provide full assist (i.e. carry, lift) to the individual. Below are some examples of conditions requiring full assist to move the occupant vertically during an evacuation:
 - a. Wheelchairs – If conditions require an immediate evacuation, and the methods mentioned above are not available or inappropriate, then a three person assist will be required to move a wheelchair down the fire stairs. One individual should stand behind the wheelchair and move the occupant to the top step. Tilt the wheelchair back slightly until you achieve a balance. With two people standing in front of the chair off to the side two or three steps down (depending on their height and reach) holding the frame and pushing slightly forward, move the wheelchair to the next step. The person behind moves the chair forward and down one step at a time, with the two individuals in front providing guidance and resistance. If there is a back-up of ambulatory occupants behind you, then you should let the other occupants ahead of you once you have reached the landing.
 - b. Walkers / walking canes / crutches and other mobility devices – The level of assistance required may vary depending on the age, mobility, dexterity with the device, etc. Generally, a three person assist will provide balance and stability to these individuals, with one person in front and one on either side providing support under the arm or elbow of the individual. Sometimes as in the case of crutches, it is much safer to let the occupant negotiate the stairs themselves, using one hand on the handrail and the other on the crutch. You can assist by carrying the other crutch for the individual.
 - c. Visually impaired using service animals – Before trying to assist a visually impaired individual, always ask how you can best help them. They may be fully capable of moving down the stairs with their service animal. Look for guidance from the individual before planning your assist. Service animals are not pets and should not be fed or separated from their owner unless absolutely necessary. Do not touch the animal without permission from its owner. Always lead the animal by its leash and not its harness.
 - d. Other impairments requiring a lift – If it is necessary to carry someone down the stairs use the Two-Person Carry Technique - The Swing or Chair Carry:

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- Carriers stand on opposite sides of the individual
- Take the arm on your side and wrap it around your shoulder.
- Grasp your carry partner's forearm behind the person in the small of the back.
- Reach under the person's knees to grasp the wrist of your carry partner's other hand.
- Both carry partners should then lean in, close to the person, and lift on the count of three.
- Continue pressing into the person being carried for additional support in the carry.

Additional Guidelines

Before you attempt to provide assistance to someone who is physically impaired:

- Always ask if the person needs assistance before you act.
- Introduce yourself and make sure that you have your ID card in place.
- If the person requests assistance, ask how best you can help.
- Remember the elderly may be hearing impaired. Make sure you look directly at them and speak slowly.
- Be patient, but firm if you meet resistance. Explain what you are going to do before you do it.
- Encourage them to continue, re-assure them that everything will be alright.
- Remain calm.

References

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
United States Fire Administration (USFA)