Home Fire Safety for Wheelchair Users

There are approximately 21.2 million people with mobility impairments in the United States. It is important for responders to understand the evacuation needs of people with mobility impairments. There is no such things as a “model” evacuation plan for people with disabilities; each building should have its own plan with a goal of getting everyone to a “safe area.”

Dawn, an employee with NDCPD, uses a wheelchair. Here she shares her own words to describe an experience that she had when a fire occurred in her condo building.

‘Approximately six years ago, my condo building was struck by lightning resulting in a fire at 5 a.m. As a person with a disability who uses a wheelchair for mobility, I have always been concerned about how I would evacuate in case of a fire. The lightning strike fried the electrical system of the condo and as a result the fire alarms in the building did not sound. I was first made aware of the seriousness of the situation when a police officer banged on my door and informed me that I needed to get out because the building was on fire. I quickly got out of bed and answered the door. When the officer realized I used a wheelchair she entered my home. I do not recall if she asked me if I needed help because all I was concerned about was how I was going to get out of the building as my only access was through the garage. The officer informed me that I could still evacuate through the garage. My next concern was my cats. I wanted to get them out but the officer would not allow me to take them which really upset me. I was escorted out of the building by the officer and was able to evacuate the building without any difficulty.

The thing that I found most interesting in this experience is that not once did the officer ask me if I wanted to put any sweats on nor did she offer to help me put any clothes on. This would have been so nice because I generally sleep in my underwear. I was so frightened at the time that the only thing I could think to do was grab a wind breaker. So after I evacuated the building, I literally was standing in the street in my underwear!!’

Before a Fire Occurs:

- Create and practice a home escape plan. Talk with your neighbors about an emergency plan.
- Identify the nearest emergency. If you use an elevator to exit your building, have a back up plan such as a ramp exit.
• Sleep on the ground floor if possible, and try to have the sleeping area near an accessible exit.
• Install heat or smoke detectors; there should be at least one smoke alarm outside every sleeping area and on every level of the home. Keep them clean and test the batteries monthly.
• If you own a cell phone, keep it next to the bed at night; this will allow you to communicate with the fire department should you become trapped in your room.
• Make arrangements for temporary housing.
• Contact the local fire department before an emergency exists. They may be able to offer suggestions and store information about your needs in the event of an emergency. For example, that a person in the house uses a wheelchair and where the bedroom is located.

What to Do in Case of a Fire:
• Touch the door with the back of your hand before opening. If you feel heat, DO NOT OPEN it. If the door feels cool, open it slowly and exit, staying low to the ground.
• Cover your nose and mouth to prevent breathing in dangerous fumes.
• Do not use elevators and **do not go back inside after exiting**.
• Call the fire department from a cell phone or use a neighbor’s phone.
• If you are trapped in your room, close all doors between you and the fire. Fill the open spaces with wet towels or rags to keep the smoke from entering the room. It is also a good idea to keep a white hankie by your bedside so that you can signal for help out of the window.

Remember, you are the expert on your abilities and needs. You will be the one to give instructions to emergency workers then they arrive, so keep your instructions simple and to the point. Knowing what to do in a fire can lower your risk of injury.

Sources:

The ND Disability Health Project can provide technical assistance to assist with health promotion, staff training and education, and disability awareness. Contact us at 800.233.1737 or visit our website at [www.ndcpd.org/health](http://www.ndcpd.org/health)

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Vision:
All people in ND have access to information and services they need to maintain good health and wellness. There are no health disparities between people with and without disabilities that are based solely on the presence of a disability.

Pay It Forward…..
Pass this information on to others who may find it helpful.

Health-related information provided in this fact sheet is for informational purposes only and should not replace advice from a medical professional. The ND Disability Health Project is funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) through a grant (1 U59 DD00278) to the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities at Minot State University. Opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the CDC.