

5th Annual Biopreparedness Symposia Series  
Protecting Our Heartland and Its Resources  
Special Populations Panel-Blind and Visually Impaired (2007)  
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I. BACKGROUND

A. Statistics

1. More than eight million Americans have limited vision; 130,000 are totally blind (American Foundation for the Blind)
2. According to the CDC, 14.7% of people age 55 and older are visually impaired; the estimated number of visually impaired Nebraskans over age 55 is 61,888 (Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired)

B. Causes of Visual Impairment and Blindness

1. Refractive Error
2. Macular Degeneration
3. Diabetic Retinopathy
4. Cataracts
5. Glaucoma
6. Retinal Disease

C. Misconceptions may affect how one identifies who is visually impaired

1. Story-sound blind
2. Majority of individuals who are legally blind will give no outward appearance
3. Some may use prescription glasses that correct somewhat but not completely

II. SPECIFIC NEEDS

A. Some people have daily medications: glaucoma and diabetes

B. Travel-called Orientation and Mobility (O&M)

1. Most people who are legally blind do not use a mobility device such as a cane
2. White Cane-Does not need to have a red tip
3. Dog Guide
4. Sighted Guide

C. Possible Complications

1. Vision impairments might impede the reading of signs
2. Person may be able to travel independently in familiar areas but not traverse in unfamiliar or altered terrain
3. Cane does not identify hanging items or open manholes
4. Dogs require food and water, and may become injured or ill
5. Sighted guide may have vision compromised or be injured
6. Eg: A blind man fell to his death when he walked out of his apartment expecting to step on his deck that had been blown away by a Miami hurricane

D. Access to Information

1. Some people may use a laptop or notetaker to facilitate communication-this is equivalent to pen and paper (not just "baggage")
2. Scrolled messages
3. Universal website design (N.O.D. 2005)
  - Bobby Web Accessibility Software Tool at <http://bobby.watchfire.com>

- W3C Web Accessibility Initiative Resources at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/Resources/#gl>
  - The Federal government's Section 508 resource at <http://www.section508.gov>
  - Web Accessibility in Mind at <http://www.webaim.org/listend>
4. Accessible formats (N.O.D)
- a. When making information or materials available for the public, it is important to prepare alternate formats such as Braille, larger font text, color contrasts, and audio cassette versions
  - b. Disability organizations can provide guidance or referrals. It may be useful to consult the guides published by organizations such as Lighthouse International at [www.lighthouse.org](http://www.lighthouse.org)

### III. ADDITIONAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- A. Access for service animals
- B. Transportation-available and coordinated for evacuation
- C. Housing-accessible environmental controls and kitchen appliances

### IV. WHAT PREPARATIONS CAN BE MADE?

- A. Involve us (people with disabilities) in planning
- B. Identify who may need assistance
- C. Consider a registry
- D. Educate persons with disabilities about realistic expectations of services
- E. Identify resources such as advocacy and disability groups
- F. Train volunteers
- G. Eg: Preparation that made a difference (N.O.D. 2005)  
 During the attack on the Pentagon, equipment previously installed to help employees and visitors with low or no vision to evacuate the facility in the event of an emergency made it possible for dozens of sighted individuals to flee the smoke-filled corridors as well

## Special Needs Registry (N.O.D. 2005)

If it is decided that a special needs registry will be developed or an existing registry relied upon, there are several issues to take into account:

List of 7 items

- If the registry system is developed, will it be approved or mandated by the local authorities?
- Are funding, equipment, and staff available to maintain such a registry? More importantly, are there resources to continually update it once it is created? An out-of-date registry is of less use during a crisis; it may even consume critical resources when emergency responders look for people who no longer live or work where the registry says they do.
- What will be the criteria for inclusion in the registry?
- Who will review applications for inclusion and make eligibility determinations?
- What expectations will be placed on individuals with disabilities once they are listed?
- What allowances and accommodations will be made for people who are temporarily disabled, including those in long-term rehabilitation, recovering from a serious illness or hospitalized?
- What safeguards will be put in place to protect registrants' privacy and the confidential information they provide? When, how and with whom can this information be shared?

Recognize that no matter how comprehensive a registry may be, not all people with disabilities will register. Some people may not wish to identify as having a disability. Others may not view their disability as creating a special need. Still others may not think to register until after they feel the impact of a disaster. Some, despite the most concerted outreach efforts, may not be aware of the registry. Therefore any registry should be considered only as a guide in an emergency, and not as a definitive or exhaustive list.

## References

1. National Organization on disabilities (2005). Emergency Preparedness Initiative Guide for Emergency Managers, Planners and Responders
2. Matthew Sapolin, (2006) Emergency Preparedness. *JVIB* 100, 865-870
3. Emergency Preparedness and People who are Blind and Visually Impaired. American Council of the Blind [www.acb.org](http://www.acb.org)

## Resources (N.O.D. 2005)

[www.nod.org/emergency](http://www.nod.org/emergency):

National Organization on Disability links and information about disaster information and people with disabilities.

- [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov):

Department of Homeland Security's emergency preparedness information website.

- [www.preparenow.org](http://www.preparenow.org):

California site but general links on disasters and special needs.

- [www.easter-seals.org](http://www.easter-seals.org):

s.a.f.e.t.y. first evacuation program.

- [www.jan.wvu.edu/media/emergency.html](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/emergency.html):

Job Accommodation Network emergency evacuation for employee's document called Employer's Guide to Including Employees with Disabilities in Emergency Evacuation Plans.

- [www.nbdc.com](http://www.nbdc.com):

Emergency evacuation checklist for people with disabilities in the workplace. (Search bar on left of homepage; type emergency evacuation checklist.)

- [www.aoa.dhhs.gov](http://www.aoa.dhhs.gov):

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging information about the senior population.

- [www.cdihp.org/evacuationpdf.htm](http://www.cdihp.org/evacuationpdf.htm):

The Center for Disability Issues and the Health Professions' guide for people with disabilities and other activity limitations called Emergency Evacuation Preparedness: Taking Responsibility for Your Safety. For publication visit website or call (909) 469-5380, TTY (909) 469-5520.

## Additional Resources

"Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities"

"Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities: an interagency seminar of exchange for federal managers"

"Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities."