

Emergency Transportation for People with Special Needs

In emergencies, people with disabilities, low-income people, seniors, and others who cannot afford transportation are often unable to evacuate in dangerous situations. People who cannot operate, or cannot afford, transportation are at the mercy of the public for transportation during an emergency. These individuals may face a wide range of challenges and may need additional assistance during an emergency evacuation.

Transportation providers play a very important role in emergency management before, during, and after an incident. With proper planning and coordination, transportation providers can provide a life saving service in emergencies. Transportation providers can use their resources and knowledge of transport people with special needs during an emergency.



Photo provided by WA State EMD

The ability of a transportation provider to respond during an emergency is subject to the providers ability to prepare and plan prior to disaster. Transportation agencies should develop emergency management plans that address and plan for various types and scales of disaster. Transportation providers should also establish employee training on emergency planning so that employees of the agency know what to do and what to expect.

During an emergency, transportation is coordinated through the local Emergency Operations Center. Transportation providers should prepare for scenarios on how different groups would be transported. Transportation providers may be asked to provide transportation to individuals in a wide variety of situations including:

- Individuals who can get to a pick up point
- Individuals who live independently and require transportation
- Individuals in group settings
- Individuals in acute pain
- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals with limited English proficiency

After an emergency, a process for returning of individuals with special transportation challenges to their location should begin. Emergency Management officials should oversee this process. The process should ensure that tools of daily living such as mobility devices, service animals, and medical equipment that was evacuated with the person with special needs, be returned with them. In the days, weeks, and months after an emergency coordination with social services is imperative as people may be without basic subsistence items, such as housing.

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The Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation (ACCT) is a partnership of members from the legislature, state agencies, transportation providers and consumer advocates whose mission is to direct and promote activities that efficiently use all available state and community resources for special needs transportation across the state.

Best Practices

We have compiled the following list of best practices based on the experiences of agencies responding during emergencies and the recommendations of the federal and state transportation administrations.

Before an emergency

- ✓ Learn the language of Emergency Management by taking classes and participating in emergency drills.
- ✓ Collaborate with partner organizations to identify individuals who may require extra transportation assistance.
- ✓ Develop strategies for tracking individuals who will be evacuated including name, point of origin, and final destination.
- ✓ Include members of the public and private sector in your planning including people with special transportation needs.
- ✓ Maintain a list of what resources are available for an emergency including vehicle type, capacity, and under what circumstances they can be used.
- ✓ Secure agreements with fuel suppliers and keep a list of fuel sites on hand.
- ✓ Identify staff with foreign language and sign language skills.
- ✓ Be aware of passengers who may not hear audible messaging, see visual cues, or need extra assistance with mobility.



Photo provided by Emergency Preparedness

- ✓ Establish back-up communications systems in case of communication failure.

During an emergency

- ✓ The emergency operations center will activate and coordinate transportation services.
- ✓ Transit agency staff should identify themselves as a representative from the agency when addressing passenger during an emergency.
- ✓ Never make assumptions about a passenger's ability during an emergency. Be aware of hidden disabilities and disabilities that may heighten during unfamiliar situations.
- ✓ Ensure the personal safety of transit staff.
- ✓ Document passenger information as they board the vehicles including point of origin and any equipment they board with.



Photo provided by WA State EMD

After an emergency

- ✓ Initiate a recovery operation as designated in the emergency management plan or as directed by the Emergency Operations Center.
- ✓ Take measures to ensure the equipment of people with special transportation needs is accounted for and accompanies them on their return.
- ✓ Use relationships with community organizations to connect individuals with special needs to necessary social and community services.
- ✓ Compile lessons learned from the experience and update emergency operations plan.