



Emergency Planning for the Elderly and Disabled

Have you ever been in a situation where the fire alarms go off inside your church, fellowship hall or church school building? While we conduct practice drills, when an alarm first sounds and church members realize it is not a drill, they may not remember how to react.

You want to eliminate the sense of urgency and confusion that takes over when an alarm sounds and ensure all remain safe, including the elderly and disabled. This can be achieved with proper planning and communication among church staff and volunteers.

Every church needs a plan to address emergencies. Without it, the chances of making wrong decisions increasing the risk of injury are much greater. Many able-bodied people can exit a church fairly easily, but what about the elderly and disabled? The following areas should be considered and added to your emergency plan.

IDENTIFY

The first step to protecting the elderly and disabled is to identify them. Designate someone to identify those in your congregation with any special needs. Meet with those people and their families to discuss their specific needs. Ask what steps would need to be taken to assist them in safely exiting the facility. Think not only of the sanctuary, but various places in the building they may be (e.g., classrooms, restrooms, social hall, etc.) should an emergency occur. Make a list of those in your congregation and their specific needs, and determine the best and safest approach to take in order to safely evacuate.

PLAN

Once you have the information as to those who may need special care, devise a response plan. Discuss with

your staff and volunteer leadership exactly what must take place in an emergency. Share the various scenarios that could potentially occur and know ahead of time the safest approach in the event of emergency.

Work with the Board of Trustees to make sure there are signs, pathways and proper lighting for those who are not able to leave on their own. Plan on the best exit for a wheelchair. Have a plan for getting people to and from each level of the facility safely.

COMMUNICATE

Once you have a plan in place, share it again with those in need so they can understand the plan and suggest changes if necessary. Next, communicate with your leadership. Get buy-in from others. Then make sure the appropriate staff and volunteers know, understand and can execute the plan. Communicate with and train ushers, greeters, staff, teachers, medical providers and others who you will want to rely on in an emergency. Again, seek their input and also help them understand their roles, in the process. Finally, share with the congregation what you expect of them in the event of an emergency.

PRACTICE

Once you have a plan and have communicated it to everyone, do something few churches have ever done. Conduct an emergency evacuation drill. With planning and ample communication ahead of time, at the end of a service some week, have people exit the sanctuary as if there were an emergency. Tell them what you want them to do, and then ask them to do it. Test the plan. See if it works. If you don't, it is just another idea on paper.

EVALUATE

Once you have completed the practice evacuation, gather as a team and determine what might need to be revised. Once again, engage those with special needs and see if they were evacuated according to plan. Make those modifications and communicate the changes to everyone.

CONCLUSION

By taking the time to discuss and plan a safe evacuation process for the elderly and others with special needs, not only will you have a much better chance of keeping

them safe, but you will send a strong message that they are valued. They will appreciate the church taking the time and letting them know that you care for them. Plan a practice evacuation at least once a year. Communicate often, and modify as necessary. It will be well worth your time.

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