



## INTEGRATING STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES INTO EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLANNING

Planning for students in emergencies means planning for *all* students, including those with disabilities and special needs. Lessons learned from recent disasters have not only emphasized this point, but they have also illuminated the critical steps schools need to take to protect their campuses. Meeting the needs of students with disabilities and special needs in the event of an emergency does not have to be a daunting or a costly task. It simply requires administrators and officials to take into account the entire school community, from students and staff members to visitors and volunteers, and then take the appropriate actions to ensure the safety of all.

### Presidential Mandate

In July 2004, President Bush signed Executive Order 13347, *Individuals With Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness*, which adds to existing legislation that provides for students with disabilities, and requires public entities to include people with disabilities in their emergency preparedness efforts.

### Plan for Special Needs Through All Four Phases

Providing for students with special needs throughout every phase of crisis management is instrumental in protecting them in an emergency. As school districts' crisis management teams address the four stages of crisis planning (mitigation and prevention, preparedness,

response, and recovery) they make decisions proactively, based on predictions about what crises can be prevented or avoided, the types of crises most likely to occur, and the implications of those crises. Districts ought to make the same proactive decisions simultaneously for their students with special needs and disabilities, considering the implications for their full participation in the schoolwide safety plan and then determining how best to address each student's needs. The crisis team should also consider the variety of disabilities—including visual, hearing, mobility, cognitive, attentional and emotional—to adequately integrate these students and their vulnerabilities into all emergency preparedness planning.

### Team Up With a Disability Specialist

When creating a school emergency management team, administrators should include a disability specialist who can provide guidance on how to meet students' physical and emotional needs. Members of a school's multidisciplinary team make ideal candidates for a crisis team, not only because they are experts in disability issues, policies *and* legislation, but also because they are experts in dealing with their school's students with disabilities—their needs and the services with which they are provided.

A school's multidisciplinary team often consists of district and school administrators, psychologists, special educators, counselors and general educators. Depending on the student population, the team may also include speech pathologists, physical therapists, occupational

therapists and other school-based professionals who provide student-centered services. These specialists can inform a school's crisis team about the extra barriers to mobility and communication that students with special needs may encounter during a crisis. They can also detail how to effectively address specific disabilities and their corresponding characteristics and integrate proper responses into crisis planning activities.

Once a school-based disability specialist is incorporated into a school's crisis team, the following steps should be implemented, thereby facilitating the creation of an effective and manageable plan that does not exclude or impede any student's safety.

### **1. Identify students' special needs.**

The crisis team should collect and organize specific data about their students with disabilities, such as who has a disability, the nature of the disability, and the implications of that disability for safety planning. Most of the student's disability information is confidential and requires specific authorization for access. The team will want to seek consent and authorization for each member prior to gathering and sharing any confidential student information that discloses someone's disability with unauthorized personnel.

Special events such as concerts, talent shows, school elections and graduation ceremonies often bring a variety of persons onto a school's campus. The crisis planning team should also prepare for the fact that visitors and volunteers may also require special consideration in the event of an emergency.

### **2. Maintain a confidential roster of students with special needs.**

The crisis team should create a confidential roster to identify students who have disabilities and

that also lists their teachers, classrooms and daily schedules, as well as their potential needs during an emergency. The roster may also include any relevant strategies that have enabled a particular student to participate successfully with his or her peers in general school activities. Because this roster contains confidential student information, it should be labeled as classified, with access limited only to authorized personnel. To ensure that this information is available in the event of an emergency, schools may want to store the list with administrative emergency gear.

### **3. Build on current accommodations, modifications and services.**

To ensure success and safety, the crisis team should build on existing social and academic plans for students with disabilities. By law, schools must establish individualized education programs (IEPs) for each student with a disability to promote their successful inclusion in classroom and nonclassroom settings. The IEP details the accommodations, modifications and services that the student uses, such as assigned seating, early dismissal from classes for timely transitions and large-print study materials. These accommodations are based on the student's strengths and needs and are selected for their capacity to promote that student's success.

Teachers should be encouraged to discuss emergency procedures with parents as part of an IEP meeting or other review to ensure parental input. Parents and teachers should also be consulted during the crisis response planning process, as they have a deeper understanding of the special needs of each child. If the school safety plan establishes individualized procedures for a student that extend services already in place, the school is more likely to implement them successfully in the event of an emergency.

#### **4. Teach students with disabilities crisis response strategies.**

The crisis team should offer crisis response training to students with disabilities and to the adults responsible for their care. The adults and the students both need to:

- Understand the crisis response plan;
- Learn to communicate with first responders (in case of a separation from their caregivers);
- Be able to communicate specifics about their special needs; and
- Use any necessary tools such as personal response plans, evacuation equipment or visual aids.

In addition, realistic trainings, such as drills with first responders, should be given periodically, as they effectively help students understand what to expect in emergencies. They also provide opportunities for students and first responders to interact and become comfortable with one another.

#### **5. Inform and train adults.**

The crisis team should educate all stakeholders, including school personnel, first responders, students and their parents about the inclusion of students with disabilities in the school's crisis response plan. To promote the success of the plan, school staff should be trained on the plan's emergency response protocols—specifically their responsibilities in meeting the needs of the students with disabilities. Schools should also ensure that parents are informed about efforts to keep their child safe at school.

Collaboration and ongoing communication with first responders is essential and facilitates the safe integration of students with disabilities into all school activities and plans. School staffs should not only inform first responders of the students who have disabilities and the nature of

### **MORE STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOLS**

To further enhance the district's integration of students with disabilities into emergency response and crisis management planning, crisis teams should:

- Include short-term accommodations for students with temporary disabilities (such as a broken limb).
- Create a buddy system for students with special needs.
- Inform a student's peers of their special needs during an emergency, only to the extent necessary, being careful to respect and ensure confidentiality about the student and his or her disability.
- Invite local responders to establish a relationship with individual students with disabilities and their teachers. Ask them to conduct special sessions explaining how to support students and staff members with disabilities during an emergency.
- Make sure that if a student has a service animal (e.g., a seeing eye dog), the animal is familiar with as many members of the school staff as possible.

their special needs, but they should also include first responders in many of the school's planning activities, exercises and drills. First responders will need to incorporate students with disabilities into their own agency's trainings, plans and exercises. Because they are experts in crises response, they are another resource that may inform the school's team of the most successful methods for supporting students with disabilities.

## RESOURCES FOR THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE CRISIS MANAGEMENT COMMUNITY

- ***Disaster Preparedness for People With Disabilities***

This brief is the result of years of firsthand experience and input by American Red Cross volunteers across the nation. It offers checklists, summaries and points of consideration for a variety of disabilities and disasters and makes powerful suggestions for the accommodations, modifications and services that students may need and that schools may easily incorporate into their crisis plans.

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/beprepared/disability.html>

- **Resources for Emergency Management Professionals**

The National Organization on Disability offers a Web page titled “Resources for Emergency Management Professionals,” which is a compilation of current articles, guidelines, presentations and other resources for the emergency response and crisis management community. The page addresses current practices and strategies relating to emergency management and people with disabilities.

<http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=1430&nodeID=1&FeatureID=1144&redirected=1&CFID=2877094&CFTOKEN=95137531>

- **Emergency Preparedness and People With Disabilities**

The American Association on Health and Disability offers extensive lists of links to valuable resources. The lists are organized both by potential crises and specific disabilities. In this section, disability specific issues are addressed, along with accommodations, modifications and services for addressing them.

<http://www.aahd.us/research/BestPractices/emergencyPrep.htm>

- ***Saving Lives: Including People With Disabilities in Emergency Planning***

The National Council on Disability is an independent federal agency that presented this report in April 2005, which addresses issues for people with disabilities as they relate to emergency preparedness planning. It also provides information on policy and grant initiatives for including people with disabilities in emergency planning, as well as a number of recommendations for integrating people with disabilities into emergency preparedness initiatives.

[http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/saving\\_lives.htm](http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/saving_lives.htm)

For information about the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant program, contact Tara Hill at [tara.hill@ed.gov](mailto:tara.hill@ed.gov); Michelle Sinkgraven at [michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov](mailto:michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov); or Sara Strizzi at [sara.strizzi@ed.gov](mailto:sara.strizzi@ed.gov). Suggestions for newsletter topics should be sent to the ERCM-TA Center suggestion box at [www.ercm.org](http://www.ercm.org).

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