

Aiding Individuals with Service Animals During an Emergency

Workplace emergency preparedness plans (or Occupancy Emergency Plans) need to address provisions for employees with disabilities (e.g., persons with hearing, sight or mobility impairments etc.) that utilize service animals. These plans should ensure that the individual with a disability, the animal and the emergency personnel can work in concert with each other to get the employee to safety during an emergency without jeopardizing the safety of the animal.

What is a Service Animal?

Service animals assist persons with different kinds of disabilities in their day-to-day activities.

Examples of work or tasks include, but are not limited to:

- Guiding - assisting individuals who are blind or have low vision with navigating safe paths of travel.
- Hearing - alerting individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing to the presence of people or sounds.
- Mobility - pulling a wheelchair, or providing physical support and assistance with balance and stability to individuals with mobility disabilities.
- Alert - assisting an individual during a seizure, alerting the individual to changes in body chemistry (e.g. blood sugar), calling for aid or retrieving items such as medicine or the telephone.
- Psychiatric - helping persons with psychiatric and neurological disabilities by preventing or interrupting impulsive or destructive behaviors.

Considerations

- Any comprehensive evacuation plan should be developed in conjunction with individuals with disabilities who use service animals. The plans should consider all emergency contingencies (i.e. lockdowns, shelter in place, evacuation) with the assumption that the animal and the user will not be separated.
- The care or supervision of a service animal is solely the responsibility of his or her handler. Just as employees are encouraged to keep emergency supply materials in a “Grab and Go Kit”, in case they should be confined to their work facility for several days, it is advisable that an employee with a service animal keep extra food and supplies on hand for their service animal. Consider keeping supplies or food on hand for the service animals of visitors as well.
- Alert first responders if there is an employee with a disability who has a service animal.
- Engage individuals with disabilities to participate in evacuation drills with his/her service animal and provide feedback related to physical obstacles as well as obstacles created by the emergency plan. Emergency preparedness policies and practices must ensure service animals can remain with their owners at Shelter in Place locations. Although not required, agencies should consider ways to transport, feed, and shelter the animals of employees who request such assistance.
- During an emergency, service animals are allowed to be transported with their owners/handlers during evacuations. Service animals are permitted to be in ALL places that serve the public as long as the animal is not out of control or otherwise posing a direct threat to the health or safety of individuals.
- A service animal may become hesitant or confused during an emergency. Discuss how to best assist the person with a disability if this should occur.

Critical Questions

- Have appropriate agency emergency personnel been given clear training on how to interact with individuals with disabilities who use service animals, and what preparations must be made (e.g. etiquette, creating emergency kits, etc.)?
- Have individuals who use service animals been given the opportunity to relay to appropriate agency emergency personnel his or her specific preferences regarding the evacuation and handling of the animal, particularly in case they are accidentally separated during an emergency? Have the individual's preferences then been put in the person's evacuation plan and shared with the appropriate building and emergency management personnel?
- Have internal responders, such as Floor Wardens or an individual's Buddy received information or training to support an individual who uses a service animal? Have they had the opportunity to become familiar with the individual with a disability and with the service animal? Are they familiar or comfortable enough to provide any necessary assistance?
- Have safe areas and shelters been protected and treated so that they are safe for service animals (e.g., chemicals and toxins may harm service animals or damage equipment, including medical devices)?
- Has the individual with a disability and their service animal been given the opportunity to participate fully in evacuation and sheltering drills, including providing feedback to exercise planners following the drill?
- Has the individual with a disability and their service animal been given the opportunity to make practice runs of the primary evacuation route as well as the alternate evacuation route(s) to strengthen their ability to navigate the paths of egress prior to an emergency?