


*2nd Edition*

# Tips


for First Responders



Seniors



People With Service Animals




People With Mobility Impairments




People With Autism



People Who Are Deaf Or Hard Of Hearing



People Who Are Blind Or Visually Impaired



People With Cognitive Disabilities



People With Multiple Chemical Sensitivities



People Who Are Mentally Ill



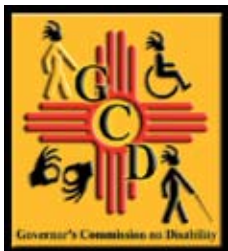
Center for Development and Disability  
University of New Mexico



Office of Health  
Emergency Management



American Association on  
Health & Disability



New Mexico Governor's  
Commission on Disability



**RESEARCH AND  
TRAINING CENTER ON  
INDEPENDENT LIVING**

*The opinions expressed in this material do not represent the official positions of these agencies.*

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## Dear First Responder:

Welcome to the second edition of *Tips for First Responders*. Two new disabilities - autism and multiple chemical sensitivities - have been added and the existing tips have been updated. Whether you are responding to an emergency caused by natural forces such as a fire, flood or tornado, or one caused by a terrorist attack, you will likely encounter persons with some type of disability who will require special assistance. Some disabilities will be obvious. Other disabilities, including some cognitive disabilities, mental illness or multiple chemical sensitivities, are difficult or impossible to detect.

Over 15,000 copies of the first edition of the *Tips* have been distributed across the country. We have kept what first responders have told us they like - the tips contain quick, easy-to-use procedures for assisting persons with disabilities they can use during emergencies as well as during routine encounters. They are not meant to be comprehensive, but contain specific information that can be read quickly either before or while they are responding to an incident.

If you would like more information about how to best assist persons with disabilities or have suggestions for future editions of this guide, please see the contact information on the back page.

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# Seniors

## Always ask the person how you can best assist them.

- ◆ Some elderly persons may respond more slowly to a crisis and may not fully understand the extent of the emergency. Repeat questions and answers if necessary. Be patient! Taking time to listen carefully or to explain again may take less time than dealing with a confused person who may be less willing to cooperate.
- ◆ Reassure the person that they will receive medical assistance without fear of being placed in a nursing home.
- ◆ Older people may fear being removed from their homes – be sympathetic and understanding and explain that this relocation is temporary.
- ◆ Before moving an elderly person, assess their ability to see and hear; adapt rescue techniques for sensory impairments.
- ◆ Persons with a hearing loss may appear disoriented and confused when all that is really “wrong” is that they can’t hear you. Determine if the person has a hearing aid. If they do, is it available and working? If it isn’t, can you get a new battery to make it work?

See the tip sheet for People Who Are Deaf Or Hard Of Hearing for more information.

- ◆ If the person has a vision loss, identify yourself and explain why you are there. Let the person hold your arm and then guide them to safety.

See the tip sheet on People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired for more information.

- ◆ If possible, gather all medications before evacuating. Ask the person what medications they are taking and where their medications are stored. Most people keep all their medications in one location in their homes.
- ◆ If the person has dementia, turn off emergency lights and sirens if possible. Identify yourself and explain why you are there. Speak slowly, using short words in a calm voice. Ask “yes” or “no” questions: repeat them if necessary. Maintain eye contact.

# People with Service Animals

**Traditionally, the term “service animal” referred to seeing-eye dogs. However, today there are many other types of service animals.**

- ◆ Remember – a service animal is not a pet.
- ◆ Do not touch or give the animal food or treats without the permission of the owner.
- ◆ When a dog is wearing its harness, it is on duty. In the event you are asked to take the dog while assisting the individual, hold the leash and not the harness.
- ◆ Plan to evacuate the animal with the owner. Do not separate them!
- ◆ Service animals are not registered and there is no proof that the animal is a service animal. If the person tells you it is a service animal, treat it as such. However, if the animal is out of control or presents a threat to the individual or others, remove it from the site.

- ◆ A person is not required to give you proof of a disability that requires a service animal. You must accept that he or she has a disability. If you have doubts, wait until you arrive at your destination and address the issue with the supervisor in charge.
- ◆ The animal need not be specially trained as a service animal. People with psychiatric and emotional disabilities may have a companion animal. These are just as important to them as a service animal is to a person with a physical disability – please be understanding and treat the animal as a service animal.
- ◆ A service animal must be in a harness or on a leash, but need not be muzzled.

# People with Mobility Impairments

- ◆ Always ask the person how you can help before attempting any assistance. Every person and every disability is unique – even though it may be important to evacuate the location where the person is, respect their independence to the extent possible. Don't make assumptions about the person's abilities.
- ◆ Ask if they have limitations or problems that may affect their safety.
- ◆ Some people may need assistance getting out of bed or out of a chair, but **CAN** then proceed without assistance. Ask!
- ◆ Here are some other questions you may find helpful.
  - “Are you able to stand or walk without the help of a mobility device like a cane, walker or a wheelchair?”
  - “You might have to [stand] [walk] for quite awhile on your own. Will this be ok? Please be sure and tell someone if you think you need assistance.”
  - “Do you have full use of your arms?”
- ◆ When carrying the person, avoid putting pressure on his or her arms, legs or chest. This may result in spasms, pain, and may even interfere with their ability to breathe.

- ◆ Avoid the “fireman’s carry.” Use the one or two person carry techniques.

### Crutches, Canes or Other Mobility Devices

- ◆ A person using a mobility device may be able to negotiate stairs independently. One hand is used to grasp the handrail while the other hand is used for the crutch or cane. Do not interfere with the person’s movement unless asked to do so, or the nature of the emergency is such that absolute speed is the primary concern. If this is the case, tell the person what you’ll need to do and why.
- ◆ Ask if you can help by offering to carry the extra crutch.
- ◆ If the stairs are crowded, act as a buffer and run interference for the person.

### Evacuating Wheelchair Users

- ◆ If the conversation will take more than a few minutes, sit down to speak to the person at eye level.
- ◆ Wheelchair users are trained in special techniques to transfer from one chair to another. Depending on their upper body strength, they may be able to do much of the work themselves.
- ◆ Ask before you assume you need to help, or what that help should be.

## Carrying Techniques for Non-Motorized Wheelchairs

- ◆ The In-chair carry is the most desirable technique to use, if possible.
  - ◆ **One-person assist**
    - Grasp the pushing grips, if available.
    - Stand one step above and behind the wheelchair.
    - Tilt the wheelchair backward until a balance (fulcrum) is achieved.
    - Keep your center of gravity low.
    - Descend frontward.
    - Let the back wheels gradually lower to the next step.
  - ◆ **Two-person assist**
    - Position the second rescuer:
      - Stand in front of the wheelchair and face the wheelchair.
    - Stand one, two, or three steps down (depending on the height of the other rescuer).
    - Grasp the frame of the wheelchair.
    - Push into the wheelchair.
    - Descend the stairs backwards.

## Motorized Wheelchairs

- ◆ Motorized wheelchairs may weigh up to 100 pounds unoccupied, and may be longer than manual wheelchairs. Lifting a motorized wheelchair and user up or down stairs requires two to four people.
- ◆ People in motorized wheelchairs probably know their equipment much better than you do! Before lifting, ask about heavy chair parts that can be temporarily detached, how you should position yourselves, where you should grab hold, and what, if any, angle to tip the chair backward.
- ◆ Turn the wheelchair's power off before lifting it.
- ◆ Most people who use motorized wheelchairs have limited arm and hand motion. Ask if they have any special requirements for being transported down the stairs.

# People With Autism

## Communication

- ◆ Speak calmly - use direct, concrete phrases with no more than one or two steps, or write brief instructions on a pad if the person can read.
- ◆ Allow extra time for the person to respond.
- ◆ The person may repeat what you have said, repeat the same phrase over and over, talk about topics unrelated to the situation, or have an unusual or monotone voice. This is their attempt to communicate, and is not meant to irritate you or be disrespectful.
- ◆ Avoid using phrases that have more than one meaning such as “spread eagle” “knock it off” or “cut it out”.
- ◆ Visually check to see if there is a wrist or arm tattoo or bracelet that identifies the person as having an autism spectrum disorder.
- ◆ Some people with autism don't show indications of pain - check for injuries.

## Social

- ◆ Approach the person in a calm manner. Try not to appear threatening.
- ◆ The person may not understand typical social rules, so may be dressed oddly, invade your space, prefer to be farther away from you than typical, or not make eye contact.

- ◆ The person may also look at you at an odd angle, laugh or giggle inappropriately, or not seem to take the situation seriously. Do not interpret these behaviors as deceit or disrespect.
- ◆ Because of the lack of social understanding, persons with autism spectrum disorders may display behaviors that are misinterpreted as evidence of drug abuse or psychosis, defiance or belligerence. Don't assume!

### **Sensory and Behavior**

- ◆ If possible, turn off sirens, lights, and remove canine partners. Attempt to find a quiet location for the person, especially if you need to talk with them.
- ◆ Avoid touching the person, and if necessary, gesture or slowly guide the person.
- ◆ If the person is showing obsessive or repetitive behaviors, or is fixated on a topic or object, try to avoid stopping these behaviors or taking the object away from them, unless there is risk to self or others.
- ◆ Make sure that the person is away from potential hazards or dangers (busy streets, etc) since they may not have a fear of danger.
- ◆ Be alert to the possibility of outbursts or impulsive, unexplained behavior. If the person is not harming themselves or others, wait until these behaviors subside.

# People Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- ◆ There is a difference between hard of hearing and deaf. People who are hearing impaired vary in the extent of hearing loss they experience. Some are completely deaf, while others can hear almost normally with hearing aids.
- ◆ Hearing aids do not guarantee that the person can hear and understand speech. They increase volume, not necessarily clarity.
- ◆ If possible, flick the lights when entering an area or room to get their attention.
- ◆ Establish eye contact with the individual, not with the interpreter, if one is present.
- ◆ Use facial expressions and hand gestures as visual cues.
- ◆ Check to see if you have been understood and repeat if necessary.
- ◆ Offer pencil and paper. Write slowly and let the individual read as you write.
- ◆ Written communication may be especially important if you are unable to understand the person's speech.

- ◆ Do not allow others to interrupt you while conveying the emergency information.
- ◆ Be patient – the person may have difficulty understanding the urgency of your message.
- ◆ Provide the person with a flashlight to signal their location in the event they are separated from the rescue team. This will facilitate lip-reading or signing in the dark.
- ◆ While written communication should work for many people, others may not understand English well enough to understand written instructions. Keep instructions simple, in the present tense and use basic vocabulary.

# People who are Visually Impaired

- ◆ There is a difference between visual impairment and blindness. Some people who are “legally blind” have some sight, while others are totally blind.
- ◆ Announce your presence, speak out, and then enter the area.
- ◆ Speak naturally and directly to the individual.
- ◆ Do not shout.
- ◆ Don't be afraid to use words like “see,” “look,” or “blind.”
- ◆ State the nature of the emergency and offer them your arm. As you walk, advise them of any obstacles.
- ◆ Offer assistance but let the person explain what help is needed.
- ◆ Do not grab or attempt to guide them without first asking them.
- ◆ Let the person grasp your arm or shoulder lightly for guidance.

- ◆ They may choose to walk slightly behind you to gauge your body's reactions to obstacles.
- ◆ Be sure to mention stairs, doorways, narrow passages, ramps, etc.
- ◆ When guiding someone to a seat, place the person's hand on the back of the chair.
- ◆ If leading several individuals with visual impairments, ask them to guide the person behind them.
- ◆ Remember that you'll need to communicate any written information orally.
- ◆ When you have reached safety, orient the person to the location and ask if any further assistance is needed.
- ◆ If the person has a service animal, don't pet it unless the person says it is ok to do so. Service animals must be evacuated with the person.
- ◆ Refer to the tip sheet on People with Service Animals.

# People with Cognitive Disabilities

## ◆ Say:

- My name is.... I'm here to help you, not hurt you.
- I am a ... (*name your job*)
- I am here because ... (*explain the situation*)
- I look different than my picture on my badge because ... (*for example, if you are wearing protective equipment*)

## ◆ Show:

- Your picture identification badge (*as you say the above*).
- That you are calm and competent.

## ◆ Give:

- Extra time for the person to process what you are saying and to respond.
- Respect for the dignity of the person as an equal and as an adult (*example: speak directly to the person*).
- An arm to the person to hold as they walk. If needed, offer your elbow for balance.
- If possible, quiet time to rest (*as possible, to lower stress and fatigue*).

◆ **Use:**

- Short sentences.
- Simple, concrete words.
- Accurate, honest information.
- Pictures and objects to illustrate your words. Point to your ID picture as you say who you are, point to any protective equipment as you speak about it.

◆ **Predict:**

- What will happen (*simply and concretely*)?
- When events will happen (*tie to common events in addition to numbers and time, for example, "By lunch time..." "By the time the sun goes down..."*).
- How long this will last – when things will return to normal (*if you know*).
- When the person can contact or rejoin loved ones (*for example: calls to family, re-uniting pets*)

### ◆ Ask for/Look for:

- An identification bracelet with special health information.
- Essential equipment and supplies (*for example: wheelchair, walker, oxygen, batteries, communication devices [head pointers, alphabet boards, speech synthesizers, etc.]*)
- Medication
- Mobility aids (*for example, assistance or service animal*)
- Special health instructions (*for example: allergies*).
- Special communication information (*for example, is the person using sign language?*)
- Contact information.
- Signs of stress and/or confusion (*for example, the person might say he or she is stressed, look confused, withdraw or start rubbing their hands together*).
- Conditions that people might misinterpret (*for example, someone might mistake Cerebral Palsy for drunkenness*).

### ◆ Repeat:

- Reassurances (*for example, “You may feel afraid. That’s ok. We’re safe now.”*)

- Encouragement (for example, “Thanks for moving fast. You are doing great. Other people can look at you and know what to do”).
- Frequent updates on what’s happening and what will happen next. Refer to what you predicted will happen, for example: “Just like I said before, we’re getting into my car now. We’ll go to... now”.

◆ **Reduce:**

- Distractions. For example: lower volume of radio, use flashing lights on vehicle only when necessary.

◆ **Explain:**

- Any written material (*including signs*) in everyday language.
- Public address system announcements in simple language.

◆ **Share:**

- The information you’ve learned about the person with other workers who’ll be assisting the person.

# People With Multiple Chemical Sensitivities

- ◆ Reassure the person that you understand he or she is chemically sensitive and will work with him or her in providing care. Be sure to ask what the person is sensitive to, including his or her history of reactions to various drugs you may have to administer.
- ◆ Flag the person's chart or other written information that he or she is chemically sensitive.
- ◆ Whenever possible, take the person's own medical supplies and equipment with them, including oxygen mask and tubing, medications, food and water; bedding, clothing, and soap - he or she may be sensitive to these items if issued at a shelter or hospital.
- ◆ If you do administer drugs:
  - Administer low doses with caution.
  - Use IV fluid bottled in glass without dextrose if possible - many people react to corn-based dextrose.
  - Capsules are generally better than tablets - they have fewer binders, fillers and dyes.

- If administering anesthesia, use short-acting regional rather than general anesthesia whenever possible and try to avoid the use of halogenated gas anesthetics.
- ◆ Consult with the person's environmental physician if possible.
- ◆ If the person is taken to an emergency shelter or a hospital, help protect him or her from air pollution. Some suggestions:
  - Avoid placing the person in rooms with recent pesticide sprays, strong scented disinfectants or cleaners, new paint or carpet, or other recent remodeling.
  - Place a sign on the door stating that the person inside has chemical sensitivities.
  - Assign caregivers who are not wearing perfume or fabric softener on clothes and who are not smokers.
  - Allow the person to wear a mask or respirator, use an air filter, or open a window as needed.
  - Keep the door to the person's room closed, if possible.
  - Reduce time the person spends in other parts of the hospital, if possible, by performing as many procedures and evaluations as possible in his or her room.

# People Who Are Mentally Ill

- ◆ You may not be able to tell if a person is mentally ill until you have begun the evacuation procedure.
- ◆ If a person begins to exhibit unusual behavior, ask if they have any mental health issues of which you need to be aware. However, be aware that they may or may not tell you. If you suspect someone has a mental health issue, use the following tips to help you through the situation.
- ◆ In an emergency, the person may become confused. Speak slowly and in a normal, calm speaking tone.
- ◆ If the person becomes agitated, help them find a quiet corner away from the confusion.
- ◆ Keep your communication simple, clear and brief.
- ◆ If they are confused, don't give multiple commands – ask or state one thing at a time.
- ◆ Be empathetic – show that you have heard them and care about what they have told you. Be reassuring.
- ◆ If the person is delusional, don't argue with them or try to “talk them out of it”. Just let them know you are there to help them.
- ◆ Ask if there is any medication they should take with them.

- ◆ Try to avoid interrupting a person who might be disoriented or rambling – just let them know that you have to move quickly.
- ◆ Don't talk down to them, yell or shout.
- ◆ Have a forward leaning body position – this shows interest and concern.

Additional copies of these tips sheets  
are available for purchase.

For information about prices, go to  
[http://cdd.unm.edu/products/  
tipsforfirstresponders.htm](http://cdd.unm.edu/products/tipsforfirstresponders.htm)

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