

National Preparedness Month – September 2007:

EVACUATE!

Urban Evacuation Preparedness

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

One of the most challenging aspects of preparing for an emergency is outlining evacuation plans. This can be especially difficult in urban settings, where there are usually too many people for the available transportation to accommodate. It is important when dealing with large groups of people to have organized and pre-planned routes of evacuation. Emergency managers will often dictate specific directions for people who are evacuating a city. For example, many cities try to have separate routes for pedestrians and for cars, to avoid interference.

However, you cannot assume that if an emergency occurs, you can just “go with the flow” and follow the lead of others around you. It is important to be personally prepared for an emergency situation.

Tips for People Who Live or Work in an Urban Area:

1. Be familiar with the various methods of public transportation around your home or office. If the nearest trains weren't working due to electrical failure, would you know where to find the city buses?
2. Make sure you know several ways to exit your building. Often there are limited ways to exit a high-rise building. Be aware of where fire escapes are located, and how to access them.
3. Realize that the evacuation of a city is a long, slow process. Stress and panic often cause people to be disagreeable and pushy. Be patient and avoid fighting with others, which will only cause more problems for everyone. If evacuating on foot, avoid walking in the streets in order not to slow down vehicular evacuation and the flow of emergency vehicles. If you must take a car, be sure to carpool with neighbors, friends or family.

4. Always opt to temporarily stay with family and friends outside the area, if possible. Evacuation centers quickly become crowded and overwhelmed with people. They should be used only as a last resort, and reserved for people who have no family or friends to stay with in the area.

Stay Calm: Formulate a Plan

The best thing that one can do in any evacuation situation is to stay calm. Clearly, this is easier said than done when faced with danger, but each person's ability to remain in control of him or herself ultimately makes a huge difference in the success of an evacuation.

Often, emergency managers will keep serious details about the situation confidential in order to prevent people from panicking. There are often situations in emergencies when people panic and tempers explode. Frightened people might ignore announcements and exit signs. There have even been occurrences when pushing and crushing in a crowd has led to fatalities.

The best way to keep yourself from losing control is to take three easy steps:

- 1. Assess the situation.** What is happening and where do I need to go?
- 2. Form a plan.** How will I get there?
- 3. Carry it out.** Do not get distracted; keep your goal in mind.

These may seem like simple and obvious steps, but they can make a big difference in the way people handle emergencies. For example, if there were a fire in your office building, it would be wise to think, "I hear a fire alarm. That means there is a fire in my building and I need to get out. The most effective way is down the stairs and out the front door. If that exit is blocked, I will take the fire escape out the window in my office."

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Many people in an emergency situation do not have a clear idea of what they are planning to do and end up wasting time by asking questions instead of moving to action. Through unnecessary investigation, people might unwittingly put themselves closer to the area of greatest danger. Taking a moment to map out your route and formulate a plan can save you from panic, hesitation, and indecisiveness.

Remember: Always *first* follow the plan that is given to you by emergency managers, if at all possible.

To Help or To Leave?

Once out of the building, use your best judgment. In most situations, the best thing to do is leave the area. If it was an isolated emergency such as a fire, move to the meeting place designated by your company or family. If it is a larger emergency that requires evacuation from the city, continue on your route.

Many people become torn as to whether or not they should offer assistance during an emergency situation. If you are a doctor, or are trained in first aid and CPR, you can inform an emergency worker and see if they need assistance. If you are not, do not stay around the scene out of curiosity; continue your evacuation. Having large numbers of people gathering at the scene of an emergency can cause more confusion and may make things worse for emergency workers.

When you come across someone who is injured, use your personal judgment. If it is a serious injury, it is better to simply notify an emergency worker rather than trying to help them yourself, if you are not medically trained. If the injury is minor, or the person is walking and only needs slight assistance, try to help. If someone is in immediate danger, it is *always* best to help him or her move away.

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Resource 22 – Regional Preparedness:

Managing Pedestrians During Evacuation of Metropolitan Areas

<http://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/pedevac/index.htm>

An in-depth report from the U.S. Department of Transportation is found at this website, which provides a look at different urban evacuation situations. It has useful information not only for the public, but for government workers, emergency planners, and industry leaders.

TOMORROW: Emergency Preparedness for
Owners of Pets and Service Animals

John Cavanagh is Communications Director for Bridge Multimedia and Chief Researcher for Emergency Information Online.

Anne Malia writes about technology and emergency preparedness for people with special needs and has contributed to the production of EmergencyInfoOnline.org and EdTechOnline.org.

Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com.**