



Connection

Disaster Services

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Responsible for Direct Client Services in Shelters

Topic: Serving People with Disabilities and People with Functional and/or
Access Needs in Red Cross Shelters

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This *Disaster Services Connection* provides guidance about serving individuals with disabilities and others with functional and/or access needs in an American Red Cross shelter. The guidance underscores our dedication to the fundamental principles and emphasizes our commitment to be inclusive. This document recognizes the importance of advance planning, and identifies ways we address the functional and/or access needs of shelter clients.

The Red Cross meets its commitment to inclusiveness by assessing the needs of each client and addressing functional and/or access needs in general population shelters. In some cases Red Cross shelter workers provide the needed services directly, and sometimes coordinate with a government or non-government partner to offer the required assistance.

On November 1st, 2010, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued [Guidance on Planning for Integrating Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters](#) (*FNSS Guidance*). This guidance was developed in consultation with the Red Cross and other key stakeholders, and reflects an inclusive approach to sheltering that parallels the Red Cross commitment to impartiality. It provides guidance to local emergency managers and shelter operators on how to develop plans that serve people with disabilities and others with access and/or functional needs during disasters. The *FNSS Guidance* promotes our shared goal of integrating people with access and/or functional needs into general population shelters when possible. It also recognizes that individuals who need continuous medical supervision or acute, life-sustaining medical care, or individuals who are a danger to themselves or others, may need to be served in a health care setting, including medical needs shelters. The *FNSS Guidance* does not establish new legal obligations but instead is a guide for integrating service delivery to people with access and/or functional needs in general population shelters.

The FEMA *FNSS Guidance* calls on all levels of government and community partners (including the Red Cross) to work together to plan for and provide services for people with functional and/or access needs during a disaster. Thus, this *Disaster Services Connection* calls on chapters to initiate this planning with local government and non-government partners to meet the anticipated functional and/or access needs in general population shelters.

This *Disaster Services Connection* contains the American Red Cross guidance on serving individuals with disabilities and individuals with access and/or functional needs

in our shelters. It will help Red Cross units:

- Understand our obligations under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA),
- Implement our commitment to sheltering people with disabilities and people with access and/or functional needs in general population shelters when possible,
- Respond to inquiries on these topics, and
- Incorporate applicable aspects of the FEMA *FNSS Guidance*.

POLICY AND LAW

The Red Cross fundamental principle of impartiality, the Disaster Policy and the Mission of Disaster Services guide our service to all people, including individuals with disabilities and functional and/or access needs. The Mission states that:

*Disaster services shall be conducted without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, **disability**, sexual orientation, citizenship, or veteran status.*

Red Cross must also comply with the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA), which prohibits discrimination against individuals on the basis of disability. Under the ADA, the Red Cross must:

- Make reasonable modifications to our policies, practices and procedures when necessary to deliver shelter services to clients with disabilities
- Provide auxiliary aids and services to ensure effective communications with shelter occupants
- Welcome people with service animals
- Remove barriers to access at the shelter facility

GUIDANCE

I. Planning and Readiness

There are key planning and readiness steps to prepare to meet the functional and/or access needs of general population shelter clients. Chapters should:

- Work with the local disability community and government partners to identify the types of disability-related and/or functional or access needs people are likely to have in an emergency, noting specific demographics in the community.
- Determine which tasks and responsibilities will be performed by the Red Cross
- Establish systems to accomplish tasks and meet responsibilities with local and/or national Red Cross resources.
- Work with local partners and federal, state, tribal, and local governments, including public health departments, to identify partner resources and the tasks and responsibilities partners will perform.
- Establish relationships with durable medical equipment companies, consumable medical supply companies, pharmacies, home health care agencies, and the public health department and identify ways to meet client needs in a general population sheltering operation.

II. Making Shelters Accessible

Ensuring that shelter facilities are accessible to all clients begins with site selection during the planning process. Using the [Shelter Facility Survey](#) (Form 6564), workers review the accessibility of entranceways, restrooms, showers, cafeterias, telephones and other service delivery areas. Through this process, the Red Cross assesses facility accessibility and identifies temporary modifications that can be made to address accessibility issues.

When a shelter is opened at the time of a disaster, workers should implement these temporary modifications. For example, workers must ensure there are wide and clear aisles and passageways to give persons with wheelchairs or walkers adequate room to maneuver. Shelter staff may need to move furniture, partitions, or equipment to create access. If necessary, staff should add portable ramps and portable commodes.

III. Identifying and Addressing Client Needs

Shelter leadership, including Disaster Health Services (HS) and Disaster Mental Health (DMH), should work together to assess and address the needs of shelter clients.

Shelter staff should:

- Use the [Initial Intake and Assessment Tool](#) during registration and consult with HS or DMH to address next steps in meeting those needs through service provision or referral.
- Have discussions with the client about the client's functional or access needs and the various ways those needs could be met.
- Respect client self-determination; involve the adult or child and the client's family in decisions about meeting the functional and/or access needs.
- Work with the client and HS/DMH to determine the appropriate resources and next steps.

A client's functional and/or access needs may require reasonable modifications and enhancements to services, using Red Cross or partner resources partners as appropriate. For example, shelter staff might:

- Adjust kitchen access policies for people with medical conditions who require access to food or refrigeration of medication.
- Modify sleeping arrangements to meet disability-related needs, such as by securing special cots through predetermined partners, local vendors or through national Red Cross resources.
- Offer assistance to people who are blind or have vision impairments.
- Consider creating "stress-relief zones," where people with certain disabilities can be free of the noise and crowds of the shelter.
- Maintain accessible routes throughout the shelter: remove objects in areas where people walk; move furniture and other items to ensure unrestricted routes to all service delivery areas.
- Consult with HS and/or DMH workers as appropriate to determine when individuals may need to be served in a health care setting to include a medical needs shelter. These would include people who need continuous medical

supervision or acute, life-sustaining medical care, or who are a danger to themselves or others.

Sometimes, adults and children with disabilities or with functional and/or access needs use the services of a personal care aide to assist with the activities of daily living. Without a personal care aide, shelter clients may require assistance with tasks such as eating, toileting, and dressing. Although the Red Cross does not typically provide personal care services, shelter workers may be able to offer basic assistance with some of these functions. Chapters should work with local government agencies and community partners to identify an agency or organization that can supply personal care assistance if a client needs it in a shelter.

IV. Communication Assistance

Red Cross shelter workers must take measures to ensure effective communication with shelter clients who have vision or hearing impairments or intellectual disabilities. Shelter staff should discuss the individual's needs directly with the client to ensure adequate services are provided.

For vision impairments, staff may:

- Read written materials to the client
- Provide materials in Braille or other alternate formats
- Assist using other reasonable methods identified in discussions with the client

For hearing impairments, staff may:

- Communicate by exchanging notes with the client
- Post information on message boards
- At the client's request or in an emergency, provide necessary information using a family member to interpret
- Assist using other reasonable methods identified in discussions with the client

In some situations, particularly in longer term shelters, a shelter client may need an American Sign Language (ASL) or other type of interpreter. Chapters should identify local Disaster Services Human Resources (DSHR) volunteers with ASL fluency and/or work with partners to provide sign language interpreters when needed.

For intellectual disabilities, staff may present information slowly, using simple language and short sentences and then try to confirm the client has understood the information and/or work with partners for services when needed.

V. Medical Equipment and Medications

Disaster Health and Mental Health Services workers review the [Initial Intake and Assessment Tool](#) completed at registration and conduct a health assessment to determine the overall health, functional and access needs of the client.

If a client needs replacement medical equipment or essential medications, the process

for replacement begins in the shelter. The replacement can occur through:

- Red Cross resources
- Government requisition
- In-kind donations
- Partnerships with other organizations

VI. Service Animals in Shelters

The Red Cross welcomes service animals in shelters. Service animals are not considered pets; they perform specific tasks for the owner. No certification is necessary to prove an animal is a service animal and shelter staff may not require documentation. When it is not apparent that an animal is a service animal, shelter staff may ask only two questions to help determine whether an animal is a service animal:

1. Do you need this animal because of a disability?
2. What work or tasks has the animal been trained to perform?

Shelter staff should direct any concerns about a service animal in a shelter to the shelter manager.

The service animal's owner is responsible for the feeding, care and supervision of the service animal. The shelter staff should work with the service animal's owner to identify a relief area for the service animal and provide plastic bags, or other disposable containers for clean-up if needed. Shelter staff may also help connect these individuals with resources such as the local pet shelter or Humane Society to assist them in meeting the needs of the animal.

RESOURCES

Serving individuals with functional and/or access needs in Red Cross shelters may be enhanced and improved with these additional tools and resources:

- [Shelter Operations Management Tool Kit](#), pp. 31 – 32 and 35 - 37
- [ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments](#) ("Tool Kit") The Department of Justice designed the tool kit to help governments comply with ADA requirements applicable to state and local governments. (Title II).
- [FEMA Guidance on Planning for Integrating Functional Needs Support Services in General Population Shelters](#) (FNSS Guidance)

QUESTIONS

Please email [Katherine Galifianakis](#) with questions regarding serving people with disabilities or other functional or access needs.