



Shelter for All

What is a Universal Access Shelter?

Shelters play an important role in protecting those who have been displaced as a result of a disaster. However, people with needs for assistance with activities of daily living due to chronic disease or disability may not be able to stay at traditional shelters for a variety of reasons. These include: the need for specialized equipment, reliance on assistive devices and/or reliance on support personnel. As a result, some municipalities have established 'special needs shelters'.



As an alternative to 'special need shelters' some states are promoting 'universal access shelters'. Universal access shelters are 'public shelters which are planned, equipped and operated to meet the sheltering needs of a wide variety of community members including most people with disabilities and older adults'.

The ultimate goal of universal access sheltering is that *'all community shelters ... will be accessible and usable by any member of the community who normally lives independently'*.

Universal access shelters have the advantage of providing protection to most people in the community. They will also help keep social networks together and alleviate the need to establish, maintain and staff a network of special needs shelters.

What are the basic elements of a universal access shelter?

The following are important elements of a universal access shelter:

- **Accessible facility** – The shelter facility is accessible to people with limited mobility. This includes parking, exterior routes, entrances, interior routes and bathrooms. For example, the hallways and spaces between beds must be wide enough for a wheelchair to pass through them.
- **Provisions for Service Animals** – People with disabilities who use service animals are not separated from them at the shelter.
- **Policies that support those with disabilities** - Policies that encourage staff to be flexible and that allow them to meet the individual needs of those with disabilities are in place.

- **Accessible Signs and Instructions**

- Directions posted on signs are in large text and/or in pictures
- Signs and printed materials are available in languages in addition to English that are spoken in the community, and in Braille
- Written announcements are posted and read aloud
- Translators are available

- **Accessible Communications Equipment** – Shelters have communications equipment such as internet teleconferencing or TTY (Telephone Typewriter) available.

- **Electricity** – Shelters are equipped with adequate generators, extension cords and power outlets. Electricity is essential to a shelter since it maintains life-sustaining medical devices and motorized wheel chairs, powers communication equipment, and preserves certain medications, such as insulin. If shelters do lose power, ensure that emergency planners make restoring it a priority.

How can municipalities create universal access shelters?

Creating a network of universal access shelters takes time. This can be done in a step-wise fashion:

- Establish a 'shelter enhancement team' made up of stakeholders such as the local Emergency Manager Director, the local American Red Cross Chapter, and disability and elderly advocacy groups from the community.
- Assess existing facilities and establish short-term and long-term goals. For example if an older school is to be used as a shelter, in the short-term focus on adding essentials such as ramps and accessible signage. In the long term, build accessibility into new facilities that may be used as shelters. If facilities are being renovated, build as much accessibility as possible into the plans for renovation..

Sources:

1. State of Connecticut Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. Universal Access Shelter Workshop, Draft Guidelines for Municipalities, February 2007. Available at: http://www.ct.gov/demhs/lib/demhs/final_draft_shelter_guidance.pdf
2. U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section. An ADA Guide for Local Government – Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities. Available at: <http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprep.htm>



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