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Security and Emergency Management
Working Group

Evacuating People with Disabilities from Transit Vehicles and Systems

Abstract: This recommended practice provides information, considerations and recommendations to help public transportation and first responder agencies advance planning, response and recovery activities associated with evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems.

Keywords: bus; communications; elevated platforms; equipment; evacuation; exercises; first responders; mobile medical equipment; people with disabilities and/or physical, cognitive and sensory impairments; personal mobility devices; platforms; rail; reunification; right-of-way; service animals; training; transit vehicles; tunnels; training; exercises

Summary: This recommended practice provides information and recommendations to help public transportation agencies and first responder partners evacuate people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems while maintaining people's dignity, agency and safety. Evacuating people with disabilities in transit environments requires an array of considerations spanning planning, policies, procedures, equipment, vehicles, communications, coordination, training, exercises and procurement. Properly evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles requires transit agencies to proactively collaborate with partners, especially first responders and the disability advocacy community.

This standard attempts to provide thoughtful, respectful terminology and guidance that expresses appreciation for all members of the community while advancing critical preparedness capabilities. Personal preferences about accommodations are important and should always be sought. However, in an emergency or during an evacuation, a person may not be fully aware of the circumstances or conditions that could impact their ability to evacuate independently and safely. Ultimately, it is appropriate for an agency or first responders to err on the side of safety, even if it means not fully accommodating people's preferences about the types of accommodations and assistance they prefer. In these situations, it's important to communicate the urgency of the situation, and while consideration should be given to a person's preferences, safety should take priority.



Foreword

The American Public Transportation Association is a standards development organization in North America. The process of developing standards is managed by the APTA Standards Program's Standards Development Oversight Council (SDOC). These activities are carried out through several standards policy and planning committees that have been established to address specific transportation modes, safety and security requirements, interoperability, and other topics.

APTA used a consensus-based process to develop this document and its continued maintenance, which is detailed in the [manual for the APTA Standards Program](#). This document was drafted in accordance with the approval criteria and editorial policy as described. Any trade name used in this document is information given for the convenience of users and does not constitute an endorsement.

This document was prepared by the Security and Emergency Management Working Group, as directed by the Security and Emergency Management Standards Policy and Planning Committee.

This document represents a common viewpoint of those parties concerned with its provisions, namely transit operating/planning agencies, manufacturers, consultants, engineers and general interest groups. The application of any recommended practices or guidelines contained herein is voluntary. APTA standards are mandatory to the extent incorporated by an applicable statute or regulation. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a transit agency's operations. In cases where there is a conflict or contradiction between an applicable law or regulation and this document, consult with a legal adviser to determine which document takes precedence.

This is a new document.



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Introduction

This introduction is not part of APTA SS-SEM-RP-022-26, “Evacuating People with Disabilities from Transit Vehicles and Systems.”

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

- individuals or organizations that operate public transit systems;
- individuals or organizations that contract with others for the operation of public transit systems; and
- individuals or organizations that influence how public transit systems are operated (including but not limited to consultants, designers and contractors).

Scope and purpose

This recommended practice provides information, considerations and recommendations to help public transportation and first responder agencies advance planning, response and recovery activities associated with evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems.

Evacuating People with Disabilities from Transit Vehicles and Systems

1. Overview

Evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems effectively, safely and with dignity requires transit agencies to leverage deliberate and specialized planning, coordination, communication, equipment and training. Emergency situations pose unique challenges for people with disabilities and/or impairments, as they may require additional time, assistance, equipment or communication support to evacuate safely. Integrating accessibility and universal design considerations into evacuation planning and operations enables transit agencies to provide safe, inclusive and resilient evacuation for all passengers.

This standard attempts to provide thoughtful, respectful terminology and guidance that expresses appreciation for all members of the community while advancing critical preparedness capabilities. Although this standard most often uses *people with disabilities* phrasing, this standard is also intended to address the needs of *people with physical, cognitive and sensory impairments*. For the purposes of this standard, a disability refers to the experience between an individual with an impairment and barriers in society, environments, systems, or policies. An impairment refers to a specific physical, sensory, or cognitive condition, loss, difference, or limitation in body structure or function, which may or may not lead to a disability.

1.1 Benefits

A transit evacuation program that integrates accessibility procedures offers the following benefits to an agency:

- Ensures compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or the Accessible Canada Act (ACA) and other federal, state, provincial, and local regulations.
- Increases the safety of all passengers, especially those with disabilities.
- Improves operational efficiency during emergency evacuations.
- Reduces liability and brand risks to transit agencies.
- Fosters collaboration between transit personnel, first responders and the disability advocacy community.

1.2 Alignment with agency ADA or ACA policies

Agency activities related to evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems should align with the agency's existing ADA or ACA policies. Transit agencies should integrate plans, processes, coordination and training related to evacuating people with disabilities within the agency's broader ADA or ACA policy. Furthermore, transit agencies should confirm that all relevant employees and partners (from leaders to frontline staff to security contractors) understand and know how to implement the agency's ADA or ACA policies, plans and procedures.

1.3 Common challenges

Prior emergencies in several transit systems reveal gaps in addressing the needs of people with disabilities during evacuation planning and operations. Transit evacuation planning should incorporate emergency management approaches that accommodate the needs of people with disabilities to deliver equal protection, access and safety for all passengers. Emergency evacuations may present the following challenges for people with disabilities.

1.3.1 Physical barriers

Physical barriers during transit evacuations can create significant challenges for people with mobility impairments, potentially limiting their ability to move safely and efficiently. Limited space and changes in levels within vehicles, platforms, roads or passageways can restrict maneuverability of mobility devices or prevent the use of large mobility devices. Improperly stored or inadequate assistive equipment can reduce accessibility or create safety hazards by blocking emergency exits. Passengers with physical impairments evacuating from floors above or below ground level may require additional assistance or use of specialized equipment. Elevators or mechanical lifts may be unavailable during power outages, creating additional challenges for people with limited mobility. Addressing physical barriers is critical to ensure safe and efficient evacuation for passengers with mobility impairments.

1.3.2 Cognitive and communication barriers

Emergency situations, including evacuations, can pose significant challenges for people with cognitive impairments or communication barriers, potentially limiting their ability to follow instructions or respond quickly. People with cognitive or sensory impairments may have difficulty understanding evacuation directions or interpreting signage, while high-stress conditions can cause confusion or disorientation, further affecting their ability to act safely. Communication barriers may be compounded when a person has both a disability and limited proficiency in the primary language used during the emergency, highlighting the need for accessible communications in multiple languages.

Some people rely on caregivers who may become separated during an emergency, increasing stress and complicating navigation. Additionally, facility designs that rely solely on voice communication can prevent people with speech disabilities from requesting assistance, highlighting the need for multiple accessible communication methods in emergency planning.

1.3.3 Environmental factors

A range of environmental factors can impact passenger safety during evacuations. Crowded areas and narrow exit pathways may restrict the movement of mobility devices, requiring additional assistance and, in some cases, specialized rescue equipment. Time-critical evacuation scenarios with limited response windows can further challenge people with disabilities, particularly when accommodations or supports are needed. In addition, sensory overload from lights, noise, smoke or crowding can lead to confusion, distress or disorientation, underscoring the importance of planning for diverse passenger needs in emergency situations.

1.3.4 Systemic gaps

Systemic evacuation and emergency management policies and procedures that do not account for accessibility needs may place people with disabilities at heightened risk during transit emergencies. Inadequate training for transit staff on disability-specific needs may impede effective communication and the provision of necessary assistance. Additionally, insufficient coordination between transit agencies and first responders can delay emergency response efforts, further compromising the safety of passengers with disabilities. Addressing these systemic gaps is critical to ensuring that emergency plans are inclusive, efficient and capable of protecting all passengers.

1.4 United States federal requirements and mandates

This recommended practice is consistent with the following United States federal regulations:

- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):** The ADA is a federal civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities. The act details protections for people with disabilities in employment, state and local services, public transit, housing, and telecommunications. ADA Title II details provisions covering public transportation services, stating that public transportation authorities may not discriminate against people with disabilities in the provision of their services. Additionally, Title II states that public transportation authorities must comply with accessibility requirements in newly purchased vehicles, make good-faith efforts to purchase or lease accessible used buses, remanufacture buses in an accessible manner, provide accessible online communications, and, unless it would result in an undue burden, provide paratransit where they operate fixed-route bus or rail systems.
- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:** This section protects people with disabilities from discrimination by entities that receive federal funding. This law requires entities to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities to ensure equal access to services.
- **Code of Federal Regulations, Title 49, Parts 27 and 37:** Part 27 of the Code of Federal Regulations enforces Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act for recipients of federal funding from the Department of Transportation. Part 37 enforces transportation and related provisions of titles II and III of the ADA and mandates that public and private entities provide accessible transit vehicles, facilities and services for people with disabilities.

1.5 Canada requirements and mandates

This recommended practice is also consistent with the Government of Canada's **Accessible Canada Act**. The ACA seeks to realize a barrier-free Canada by January 1, 2040, through the proactive identification, removal and prevention of barriers for persons with disabilities. The ACA identifies transportation as a priority area and applies to federally regulated transportation entities, including airlines, airports, passenger rail services, ferries and other federally regulated transportation providers. The ACA also establishes accessibility requirements for communications and information technologies, reinforcing the importance of providing accessible emergency communications.

Canadian transit agencies should also consider applicable provincial and territorial accessibility legislation and regulations, which may establish additional requirements beyond the ACA. Examples of provincial and territorial legislation include the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), Accessibility for Manitobans Act, Accessible British Columbia Act, and Accessibility Act (Nova Scotia).

2. Outreach and collaboration

Effective evacuation planning for people with disabilities requires proactive and inclusive engagement with a broad range of internal and external partners. Collaboration supports planning, response and recovery by incorporating operational realities, accessibility needs and community perspectives into evacuation procedures. Transit agencies should conduct structured and recurring outreach and collaboration activities that are integrated into the agency's emergency management and accessibility programs.

Transit agencies should identify, engage and maintain relationships with disability advocacy groups, first responder partners, emergency management organizations, public advisory bodies and internal departments to develop equitable and comprehensive evacuation strategies. These partners may contribute to evacuation plan development, communication material review, training and exercise support, and post-incident evaluation.

2.1 Local disability advocacy groups and other trusted authorities

Engagement with disability advocacy organizations strengthens evacuation planning by incorporating the lived experiences and expectations of people with disabilities. This engagement reflects the principle of “Nothing about us without us,” promoting meaningful representation by people whose needs and perspectives directly inform evacuation operations. Transit agencies should also seek input from individuals representing diverse disability communities and backgrounds, recognizing that evacuation needs and barriers may vary based on a person's disability and other aspects of their identity and lived experience.

Disability community partners may include:

- Centers for Independent Living (CILs)
- State disability integration advisers
- Local disability advocacy organizations and trusted authorities
- Organizations representing people with specific impairments (e.g., blindness or low vision, hearing loss, intellectual or developmental disabilities, or complex medical needs)

These partners may participate in evacuation planning activities, training and exercise design and conduct, communication assessments, and after-action reviews.

2.2 Collaboration with first responders and emergency management partners

Transit agencies should maintain strong working relationships with local first responders, including fire departments, emergency medical services, police departments, sheriff's offices and specialized rescue teams. Collaboration helps clarify operational roles, responsibilities and expectations during evacuations involving people with disabilities. Joint planning also supports coordinated use of specialized equipment and shared understanding of system characteristics that may affect evacuation operations.

Coordination with local and regional emergency management organizations promotes alignment with broader community evacuation frameworks, hazard-specific planning, reunification processes and mass care procedures. These partners may provide technical support, planning guidance and integration into community-wide emergency operations plans.

2.3 Paratransit and specialized transportation providers

Paratransit and specialized transportation providers play a critical role in evacuating people who rely on mobility devices, medical equipment or service animals or cannot use conventional fixed-route transit. Collaborative planning activities may include the following:

- Identifying accessible vehicles and available operators.
- Establishing contingency transportation plans for powered mobility device users or people requiring medical support equipment.
- Coordinating recovery and reunification procedures after an incident.

2.4 Internal transit agency partners

Agencies should coordinate with internal departments that engage with people with disabilities and incorporate the additional perspective into evacuation planning. Key internal partners may include the following:

- customer service teams
- ADA or ACA or accessibility offices
- community engagement and outreach teams

The following are two transit agency examples:

- **CapMetro's Community Engagement Team and Accessibility Department:** The Community Engagement Team creates programs for the public to share their transit needs and experiences, while the Accessibility Department provides access for riders who use mobility devices, provides services for older riders and more.
- **DART's Mobility Ambassadors:** Mobility Ambassadors provide free travel orientation to teach skills necessary to navigate public transit in a safe and independent manner.

2.5 Public advisory committees

Public advisory bodies allow transit agencies to solicit feedback from community members, disability stakeholders, first responders and caregivers. These committees can provide insight on evacuation planning, equipment needs, communications and training. Furthermore, regular engagement with these groups supports effective planning and continuous improvement.

Examples of these committees at other agencies include the following:

- CapMetro's Access Advisory Committee
- DART's Paratransit Advisory Group
- LA Metro's Public Safety Advisory Committee and LA City Council ADA groups
- Sound Transit's Citizens Accessibility and Advisory Committee (CAAC)

3. Evacuation planning considerations

Transit agencies should develop comprehensive plans that address the full range of emergency, nonemergency and all-hazards scenarios most relevant to their jurisdictions and risk assessments. For more information about emergency planning in the transit environment, see APTA SS-SEM-S-014-20, "Transit Agency Emergency Management Program"; APTA SS-SEM-RP-019-24, "Emergency Operations Plan for Transit Agencies"; APTA SS-SEM-S-003-08, "Security and Emergency Management Aspects of Planned and Unplanned Special Event Service"; APTA SS-SEM-RP-011-09, "Regional Emergency Planning and Participation in Mutual Aid"; and APTA SS-SIS-S-017-21, "Security Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Transit."

As part of transit planning, agencies should address capabilities, resources and activities to safely evacuate all passengers from transit vehicles and systems, including passengers with disabilities and those with access and functional needs. People may have apparent or non-apparent disabilities or may develop access and functional needs because of an incident. Transit agencies should integrate planning for people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs into overall plans rather than addressing these considerations in separate or standalone plans.

The following suggestions are intended to shape agency preparations for evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems. Agencies should consider the items below when developing policies and procedures, applying pre-incident planning activities to strengthen response and recovery capabilities.

- **Community coordination:** Transit agencies should proactively and inclusively engage with a broad range of internal and external partners during planning. See Section 2 for detailed guidance about planning partners.
- **Formal agreements:** Agencies should work with internal and external partners to establish formal agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding, service level agreements) to define expectations.

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- **Registries of people with disabilities:** If permitted by agency policy and law, agencies can consider exploring voluntary, confidential and updated registries of people with disabilities who may need individualized notification or evacuation assistance in an emergency. Agencies can seek existing registries in their jurisdictions or consider creating an agency-specific registry, though this may be challenging. For instance, transit agencies could explore voluntarily associating people with disabilities with fare cards. When feasible, transit personnel should avoid making assumptions about a person's abilities and instead ask people how best to assist them. Transit agencies can explore registry approaches in Florida, where this practice is common for pre-planned hurricane evacuations. If agencies choose to explore voluntary registries, they should consider incorporating multiple languages and emergency contact information.
- **Capital, infrastructure, vehicle and system planning:** Agencies should consider the potential need for and procedures governing the evacuation of people with disabilities when designing and procuring transit systems, facilities and vehicles. Agencies should consider proximity to evacuation points between stations and confirm that evacuation procedures do not force longer travel times to evacuation points for people with disabilities. Agencies should incorporate universal design principles to advance accessibility for all passengers.
- **Inclement weather:** Agencies should consider weather hazards and how environmental conditions may affect evacuating people with disabilities. In some circumstances (e.g., tornadoes, lightning, extreme heat, extreme cold, or severe storms), it may be safer for passengers to shelter in place or remain on a vehicle rather than evacuate. When evacuation is necessary, agencies should consider how weather conditions may affect accessible evacuation routes, mobility, wayfinding, communications, availability of assistive equipment, and the safety and well-being of passengers throughout the evacuation. Agencies should also consider the availability of accessible shelters, warming or cooling locations, and accessible transportation when prolonged weather conditions affect evacuation, response or recovery operations.
- **Specialized equipment:** Transit agencies may need to explore, procure and/or pre-position specialized mobile and stationary equipment and facilities (e.g., evacuation chairs, lifts, ramps, communication aids, medical support equipment, paratransit vehicles) to support safe, timely, and dignified evacuations. See Section 4 for more information.
- **Evacuating people with their equipment, service animals or personal care attendants (PCAs):** Agencies should attempt to avoid separating people from mobility equipment, medical equipment, service animals, PCAs, family and companions whenever feasible and plan to transport essential equipment (e.g., mobility devices, medical equipment, assistive technology) with the person during evacuation.
- **Reunification planning:** Again, agencies should avoid separating people from mobility equipment, medical equipment, service animals or people traveling with them whenever feasible. However, depending on the nature of the emergency, separation may be a life-saving necessity and agencies should plan accordingly. Transit agencies should establish level-of-service expectations for assisting passengers with disabilities, including maintaining dignity, minimizing separation from mobility devices or service animals, and ensuring continuity of care during evacuation and relocation. Agencies should have procedures to care for service animals when separated from their owners. See Section 6 for more information.
- **Communications planning:** Transit agencies should provide consistent evacuation instructions in multiple formats and languages that are accessible to people with sensory, cognitive or language-related needs. Example formats include verbal, written, pre-recorded audio, large print and Braille. Agencies should plan for redundant communication methods and train personnel to adapt communications during emergencies. Personnel should understand the importance of avoiding assumptions about a person's abilities and ask the person how best to assist them. See Section 5 for more information on communications planning.

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- **Staffing:** Agencies should clearly describe relevant roles, responsibilities, expectations and authorities in plans and policies. Agencies should have plans, including contingency plans, to provide staffing and surge personnel in the event of an emergency.
- **Training, exercises and continuous improvement:** Agency staff, contractors and partners should receive training and understand their roles and responsibilities to ensure effective evacuations for people with disabilities. Agencies should conduct exercises to assess plans and capabilities. Training, exercises and continuous improvement activities should be described in agency plans. See Section 8 for more information.

4. Equipment considerations

Evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems may require specialized equipment. Agencies should consider a variety of factors to determine the types of equipment for use on their system. Agencies should also document policies, responsibilities and procedures to address the use of equipment.

4.1 Training

Agencies should provide equipment training to all personnel with responsibilities for assisting individuals with disabilities during evacuations to confirm qualifications and capabilities to use the equipment. See Section 8 for guidance about training and exercises.

4.2 General considerations

The type of equipment required will vary based upon the type of transit vehicle, location of evacuation and environmental conditions. Agencies should first consider the types of vehicles (bus, rail vehicle, paratransit vehicle, ferry, etc.) and their design and characteristics.

For buses, agencies should evaluate existing accessibility equipment on the vehicle, as well as the structure of the vehicle, noting that different types of buses (e.g., charter-style, city-style) have different characteristics. For rail vehicles, agencies should consider the power systems (e.g., overhead catenary rail [OCS], third rail, diesel) and access capabilities (e.g., door locations, right-of-way restrictions, existing ramps). For paratransit vehicles, agencies should consider the type of vehicle (e.g., minivan, van, cutaway vehicle), access points, and accessibility equipment already installed. Agencies may consider modifying existing vehicles and/or rolling stock to include equipment and procuring new vehicles.

The location of an evacuation could also impact the type of equipment needed. Rescue equipment needs should be driven by the structure of the transit system, as needs may vary based upon a system's structures (e.g., at-grade right of way, elevated guideways, tunnels or below-grade areas, underground platforms and stations). For instance, elevated guideways may require use of telescoping six-foot ladders, platform steps, ramps or other equipment to access and provide safe ingress for first responders and egress for all evacuating passengers. Similarly, equipment that may work on an elevated guideway may not work in a tunnel.

Transit agencies should identify evacuation equipment for tunnels or below-grade structures based on size constraints for walkways or other emergency evacuation routes, weight and movement requirements, and storage locations. Pathways may restrict the turning radius of personal mobility devices or rescue equipment, particularly when using ramps or bridges to remove heavier personal mobility devices such as scooters or powered wheelchairs.

Environmental factors, such as seasonal conditions on an elevated guideway, may change the equipment that can be deployed safely. Weather conditions (e.g., precipitation, humidity, temperature) may impact whether equipment can be safely used during an evacuation. Transit agencies should consider their operating

environment to determine if different equipment or procedures may be required during different environmental conditions.

4.3 Specialized rescue equipment

Considerations for evacuating people with disabilities may lead agencies to purchase or build specialty equipment to meet community needs. Equipment could include carts, steps, ramps and other options (see [Figure 1](#)). If an agency determines that equipment is necessary, it should consider who will own and maintain the equipment. Agencies should also consider who should train and certify personnel to use the equipment, and whether the training is provided and certified by the manufacturer or conducted internally.

Agencies will need to determine where to store equipment, such as on transit vehicles or along the right-of-way. When making these decisions, agencies should consider how personnel will access this equipment during an emergency and how many pieces of equipment to procure, which may depend on storage options. Holders of equipment could include agency personnel directly responsible for using the equipment during an emergency or first responders. Transit agencies should provide transit personnel and emergency responders up-to-date maps or lists of locations that identify the locations of equipment and address any access points and instructions.

FIGURE 1
WMATA's Emergency Tunnel Evacuation Cart



4.3.1 Rescue vehicles

Agencies could consider using rescue vehicles to evacuate people with disabilities from impacted transit vehicles. Rescue vehicle options could include deploying preexisting vehicles such as hy-rail vehicles used for track maintenance, creating specialized vehicles for evacuation purposes or moving rescue trains to an adjacent track or tunnel. Creating and/or procuring specialized vehicles may entail significant costs, so agencies should understand the manufacturing, maintenance and training requirements before pursuing this option. Other options may be to equip local first responder vehicles with hy-rail or other access capabilities for a system's right-of-way or equip transit-owned hy-rail vehicles with rescue equipment, though both options may require significant cooperation, training, and coordination between transit agencies and first responders. Agencies should work with local responders to determine if this is an effective and desirable

approach. Finally, agencies should plan alternatives for scenarios (e.g., OCS is powered down) that may prohibit the use of certain rescue vehicles.

4.3.2 Personal mobility devices, medical equipment and service animals

Transit agencies' procedures and rescue equipment should, as much as possible, keep an impacted person's personal mobility device, medical equipment (e.g., oxygen tanks or concentrators), and service animals with them. This provides a person with a disability the same degree of independence that they have during their day-to-day lives. If agency procedures include transit employees touching or moving someone's equipment or service animal, they should ensure that procedures require that employees seek and receive consent from the person, unless the situation is so unsafe that seeking such consent is impossible or dangerous.

If an agency contemplates separating people from their devices or animals, they must include provisions for care for and reuniting people with their devices and animals. Where possible, agencies should seek to notify an individual's relatives, friends, or other emergency contact. See Section 6 for more information about reunification considerations.

4.3.3 Durable medical equipment

Agencies should consider procuring and positioning durable medical equipment (DME) such as wheelchairs and walkers for evacuees who may have to leave behind personal equipment. If an agency procures and stores DME, they should develop and conduct routine inspect procedures to assure equipment is maintained in a functional state.

If an agency cannot store DME, it should know how to use DME that may be provided by first responder agencies. Agencies should also make arrangements with first responders or paratransit providers to coordinate locations to transport riders who may need temporary DME in the event that they are separated from their personal DME.

4.3.4 Communications equipment

While day-to-day customer communications equipment should be universally accessible, transit agencies may require additional communications equipment during emergencies. For example, agencies can provide flash cards, communications boards, or paper and pencil to deliver additional communications needs, such as drawing pictographs or displaying instructions. Equipment should also address the needs of people with blindness or vision loss. See Section 5 for more information.

4.3.5 Equipment training

Regardless of the equipment deployed, agencies need to provide training to ensure safe and effective use. See Section 8 for more information.

5. Communications considerations

Intentional and diverse communication is essential during all phases of an incident, especially for populations that receive and perceive information differently. Accessible communications platforms (e.g., high-visibility signage, sirens and annunciators, illuminated evacuation routes and signage, screens and displays, accessible wayfinding including tactile maps) help all people better understand information and should be included in vehicles and fixed infrastructure. Accessible communications are especially important for preparedness, safety, security, alerts and warning information. See APTA RT-VIM-S-026-12, "Rail Transit Vehicle Passenger Emergency Systems," for more information on passenger emergency systems for rail transit vehicles.

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Transit agencies should socialize evacuation and preparedness guidance long before an event requiring customers to evacuate. Transit agencies should make evacuation information publicly available; easy to navigate on web pages; and obtainable in a variety of languages and formats, including videos with subtitles, alternative text for images, screen reader legibility and/or sign language interpretation. Agency evacuation information for the public should include information regarding treatment of assistive devices and service animals during evacuations. Before publishing materials, transit agencies should consult advocacy and advisory groups to ensure that agency procedures reflect best practices.

5.1 Accessibility for online content

All government transportation organizations must consider ADA Title II or the ACA when hosting content online. Guidelines and success criteria for accessible online content follow:

- **Perceivable:** Information and user interface components are presentable to users in ways they can perceive. This means that users must be able to perceive the information being presented (it can't be invisible to all their senses).
- **Operable:** User interface components and navigation are operable. This means users must be able to operate the interface (the interface cannot require interaction that a user cannot perform).
- **Understandable:** Information and the operation of user interfaces is understandable. This means that users must be able to understand the information as well as the operation of the user interface (the content or operation cannot be beyond their understanding).
- **Robust:** Content is robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies. This means that users must be able to access the content as technologies advance (as technologies and user agents evolve, the content should remain accessible).

5.2 Preparedness and pre-incident messaging

Transit agencies should apply accessibility best practices to facilitate the safe and effective evacuation of people with disabilities. Guidance includes the following:

- Ensure that all preparedness communication and materials meet local, state, provincial, and federal accessibility standards.
- Consider accessible, multimodal communication platforms (e.g., high-visibility signage, sirens and annunciator, glowing or illuminated evacuation routes and signage, screens and displays that receive common alerting protocol messages) and accessible wayfinding with tactile maps during initial vehicle and building procurement efforts.
- Consider including opportunities for travelers to learn about evacuation procedures and expectations before they travel, exploring options such as website resources; information on physical or virtual tickets; and banners, signs and displays in facilities and vehicles.
- Ensure that all customer information and awareness materials include specific guidance for people with disabilities.
- Encourage self-advocacy and preparedness as part of community outreach.

5.3 Communications during an incident

During an emergency, transit agencies should continue to incorporate accessible communication principles to provide accurate, actionable guidance that is consistent with pre-incident preparedness messaging. Transit agencies should consider applying pre-recorded evacuation messages that use plain language, multiple modalities (screens, annunciators, etc.) and multiple languages. Transit agencies should note that the volume of announcements may need to be raised during an emergency to account for additional noise that may be present.

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Transit agencies should incorporate accessible communication in their primary, alternate, contingency and emergency (PACE) communication plan in the event of loss of power or loss of primary communication systems. Some systems may not have backup power for annunciators or in-vehicle displays, and agencies should establish evacuation communications procedures resilient to technology losses. Alternative platforms include physical materials (e.g., pictogram books) to communicate with nonverbal people.

Transit agencies should provide staff training on specialized communications for people with disabilities, including people who are blind, deaf, nonverbal or vulnerable to sensory overwhelm. Techniques include communicating directly with a disabled person, tailoring communications to interpreters, applying specialized communications tools and adjusting manner of address (slower, quieter speech). These techniques may also improve communications with people who have a low level of English proficiency.

Finally, it is always preferable to receive verbal consent to move or evacuate a person. Nonverbal consent (e.g., nodding) will also typically suffice. However, confirming consent may not be possible in all cases, and there are circumstances in which consent is implied by the nature of the situation. In these circumstances, transit agencies should evacuate people to prevent injury or loss of life, potentially without their property, and in dire situations without their assistive mobility equipment. If a person refuses to evacuate and there is no immediate bodily risk, this choice may be respected. However, first responders will make decisions according to their evaluation of risks, and they may not wait for the person to consent to being evacuated.

5.4 Communicating with specific populations

Transit agencies should incorporate the following guidance to strengthen communications with people with disabilities during an emergency.

5.4.1 Emergency personnel

Staff should immediately notify emergency personnel of any people remaining in the building or vehicle and their location.

5.4.2 People with hearing impairments

Staff should face the person when talking with them, speaking clearly and tersely while describing the situation. To attract their attention, staff could consider touching them, using eye contact, or turning a light switch off and on. Staff should offer visual instructions (e.g., pointing toward exits or an evacuation map) in guiding the person to the safest exit. While gestures may be helpful, staff should be prepared to write notes describing the emergency and nearest evacuation route if the person does not appear to understand spoken guidance.

5.4.3 People with visual impairments

Staff should describe the nature of the emergency. People with a visual impairment may be familiar with their immediate surroundings and frequently traveled routes but unfamiliar with evacuation routes and require navigation assistance during an emergency evacuation. Staff should not grasp a person's arm without first asking, as this may disorient a person with a visual impairment.

If a person welcomes assistance, staff should offer an elbow and escort them to a safe place while simultaneously providing direction (especially in an area with crowds or obstructions). When walking, staff should provide a verbal description of the evacuation route, using estimated distances and directional terms. Upon reaching safety, staff should orient the person to their location and ask if they need any further assistance. People with visual impairments may have service animals, which may become disoriented during an emergency. Staff should consult the owner to understand how service animals can be assisted.

5.4.4 People who are Deafblind

Combined vision and hearing disabilities create unique communication, access and mobility needs. While deafblind people use a variety of communication methods, transit agencies should consider the following when evacuating people who are deafblind:

- Use the "X" signal, which is a widely recognized universal safety and emergency indicator in the DeafBlind community. The "X" signal involves tracing or drawing a large "X" with your finger across the person's back or in the palm of their hands, signaling immediate danger and the need to evacuate.
- Provide a tactile experience during an emergency.
- Guide, not grab, passengers who are deafblind.
- Avoid leaving an individual who is deafblind alone in an empty space. If one must do so, ensure there is a wall for the individual to lean on and find their bearings.
- Offer different communications protocols based on an individual's level of hearing and vision ability.

5.4.5 People with mobility limitations

Staff should avoid making assumptions about mobility limitations and first ask people if they need assistance. People with mobility limitations that do not require mobility devices may still need assistance, and staff should ask if people can evacuate themselves or if they require assistance.

When approaching a person using a wheelchair or other mobility device, staff should first ask for their preferences. Nonambulatory people's needs and preferences vary widely and require staff to inquire about their assistance preferences. Staff should understand the availability, location and operation of available equipment (e.g., evacuation chairs). If a person does not want to be removed from their mobility device during an imminent danger, staff should direct them to the nearest area of refuge or stairwell and notify emergency personnel immediately. Most wheelchairs are too heavy to carry down stairs or a long distance manually, so if the person wishes to be carried without their wheelchair or mobility device, consult with them on the best carry options (e.g., two-person cradle carry, office chair evacuation, evacuation chair).

5.4.6 People with psychological disabilities

Staff should observe the person's behavior and assist as needed. Staff should understand that alarms, smoke and/or crowds may be overwhelming and offer assistance, speaking calmly and avoiding touching the person without permission. Staff should provide reassurance, asking how best to help and offering to stay with the person once evacuated, if needed. Noise cancelling headphones, ear plugs, and visors to block alarm sounds and lighting may help individuals experiencing sensory overload.

5.5 Post-incident messaging

Post-incident messaging should notify people of the threat's conclusion. Post-incident messages should be just as thoughtful, direct and accessible as all other messages to ensure that all who have evacuated, sheltered or believed they are at risk do not need to search for additional information regarding their safety and security.

Agencies should prepare communications to help people continue their journey, especially when people are in an unfamiliar area or require reunification with family members, caretakers, mobility equipment or service animals. See Section 6 for more information.

6. Recovery considerations

Emergency management standards recommend conducting recovery planning as early as possible during incident response, if not before an incident occurs. When conducting recovery planning, transit agencies

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should deliberately consider activities and needs for people with disabilities. During pre-incident planning, transit agencies should assess capabilities and resources and resolve any identified resource or process gaps.

When planning for and conducting recovery operations, transit agencies should address reunifying people with mobility equipment, medical equipment, service animals, PCAs and other travel companions. Transit agencies should develop reunification procedures prior to emergencies and coordinate anticipated activities, roles and responsibilities with internal and external stakeholders (e.g., first responders). Transit agencies and stakeholders should explore circumstances where people with disabilities may need to be or are accidentally separated from their equipment, service animals or caretakers and establish a process to ensure that belongings are identified, accounted for, and able to be reunited or retrieved as soon as possible to allow the person to get back to normalcy. Plans for medical equipment should be made in consultation with local EMS agencies.

Planners should consider methods for direct communication with people needing reunification to maintain accountability and, if needed and as appropriate, obtain an approved secondary contact. Agencies should consider options to notify relatives and emergency contacts to help transport people home, if required.

Transit agencies should pre-identify locations for reunification. Questions to assist in identifying reunification areas include these:

- Is the area accessible for people with mobility needs?
- Do additional means of transportation (e.g., paratransit) need to be established to transport people from the safe evacuation area to the reunification area?
- Does the location require additional accommodations (e.g., additional wheelchairs, places to sit, designated sensory-friendly area, safe area for service animal caretaking) for people that may have been separated from their equipment, service animals or caretakers?
- Does the system operate in jurisdictions with pre-determined reunification sites? If so, is the agency able to use them?
- Do additional means of transportation need to be established to transport people from the reunification area to their ultimate destination?
- During evacuations for large-scale incidents, what is the agency's role and does the emergency plan address needs for people with disabilities?

Emergency circumstances may result in damage to or loss of a person's equipment. During recovery planning, agencies should work with risk management, customer service and other key stakeholders to determine how to address equipment damage or loss.

Agencies should consider deploying customer service representatives to assist with recovery activities and assist with coordination and advocacy, especially for addressing damage to or loss of personal property, which can be a burdensome process when it involves mobility equipment. Transit agencies should also provide an accessible platform to collect feedback to inform continuous improvement activities.

7. Procurement considerations

Agencies should address costs and related procurement considerations associated with specialized equipment and activities to evacuate people with disabilities from transit vehicles and facilities.

Agencies should begin the process by conducting a needs assessment to identify equipment or procedures to evacuate people with disabilities. Agencies should consider evacuations from transit vehicles inside stations or facilities, transit vehicles outside stations or facilities (e.g., on roadway), and facilities themselves. Needs

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assessments should address how to evacuate people in powered chairs and other mobility devices in a timely and dignified manner without requiring them to leave those devices except in life-safety emergencies.

To avoid unnecessarily duplicative procurements and identify efficiencies or cost sharing arrangements, agencies should coordinate the needs assessment with local emergency management and first responder agencies. Agencies may identify unique needs that may require custom-fabricated equipment using agency resources or a custom supplier. Agencies should also seek needs assessment input from the public, advocacy groups and peer transit agencies with similar vehicle and/or system designs.

After identifying their requirements, agencies should assign funding and procure the necessary equipment and resources. They may be able to partner with first responder agencies to share costs associated with procuring, storing and using special equipment in both emergency and nonemergency situations. Agencies should consider storage, movement and maintenance costs associated with equipment. Agencies may choose to store equipment on-site, in dedicated vehicles or trailers, or at partners' facilities. They should assign funding and responsibilities for conducting inventory management, inspection, maintenance and replacement.

8. Training and exercises

Training and exercises are vital to success. There are several APTA resources currently available to assist agencies with training and exercise development, including APTA SS-SEM-S-004-09, "Transit Exercises," APTA BTS-BO-RP-001-07, "Recommended Practice for Transit Bus Operator Training," APTA RT-OP-S-013-03, "Training of Rail Operating Employees" and APTA BTS-BO-RP-002-07, and "Recommended Practice for Transit Supervisor Training."

Agencies should establish a training and exercise program that defines role-specific responsibilities, frequency and evaluation criteria.

8.1 Training

Training should include familiarization not only with policies and procedures, but also equipment and communication methods. It should be provided to all stakeholders (e.g., supervisors, managers, operators, first responders). Both skills-based and procedural training are crucial for successful implementation and proficiency. Agencies should create methods to validate proficiency, such as skills demonstration and/or evaluation.

Industry standards suggest that the training content plays a significant role in the method of training delivery. To address requirements for evacuating people with disabilities, consider the following example training topics:

- familiarization with various types of mobility devices
- processes to safely operate emergency equipment
- different forms of communication (including interpreters and navigating sensory overload)
- communicating effectively with people who have disabilities and limited primary language proficiency
- consent and implied consent in life-safety situations
- prioritization of putting people's needs first

Agencies should differentiate training for different roles, as appropriate. For instance, agencies should provide operators training to ensure that they understand emergency communications guidelines and expectations, including responsibilities for communicating with and assisting people with disabilities. Training should include both internal personnel and external partners, if appropriate.

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Agencies should describe the frequency and timing for both initial and refresher training to maintain proficiency. To maintain compliance with agency records management policies, they should also maintain appropriate documentation, including attendance records, summaries of course content and qualification/requalification records.

8.2 Exercises

Transit agencies should make provisions to evaluate evacuating people with disabilities from transit vehicles and systems during exercises. Transit agencies should assess internal evacuation protocols via independent exercises and evaluate interorganizational procedures with partners, such as first responders, during joint exercises. Exercises should evaluate as many aspects of an agency's evacuation plan as practical during both discussion- and operations-based exercises. Exercises should include defined learning objectives and evaluation criteria.

Transit agencies may consider incorporating procedures and/or skills involving people with disabilities into other planned exercises to evaluate a wider range of preparedness and response. They should also explore including members of the disability advocacy community on exercise planning, control and evaluation teams to confirm that exercises and protocols meet people's requirements. See APTA SS-SEM-S-004-09, "Transit Exercises," for more information on conducting transit exercises.

Related APTA standards

APTA SS-SEM-S-003-08, “Security and Emergency Management Aspects of Planned and Unplanned Special Event Service”
APTA SS-SEM-S-004-09, “Transit Exercises”
APTA SS-SEM-RP-011-09, “Regional Emergency Planning and Participation in Mutual Aid”
APTA SS-SEM-S-014-20, “Transit Agency Emergency Management Program”
APTA SS-SEM-RP-019-24, “Emergency Operations Plan for Transit Agencies”
APTA SS-SIS-S-017-21, “Security Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Transit”
APTA SUDS-UD-GL-010-20, “Transit Universal Design Guidelines”
APTA RT-VIM-S-026-12, “Rail Transit Vehicle Passenger Emergency Systems”
APTA BTS-BO-RP-001-07, “Recommended Practice for Transit Bus Operator Training”
APTA BTS-BO-RP-002-07, “Recommended Practice for Transit Supervisor Training.”
APTA RT-OP-S-013-03, “Training of Rail Operating Employees”

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Definitions

cognitive impairment: A condition that affects a person’s ability to process, retain or act upon information. These limitations may impact a person’s ability to understand or follow evacuation procedures, and people with cognitive impairments may require additional guidance and support to ensure their safety during an emergency. Examples include amnesia, dementia, developmental or intellectual disabilities, psychiatric disorders affecting cognition, and traumatic brain injury.

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disability advocacy community: A group that works to advance accessibility; protect the rights of people with disabilities; and promote inclusion through education, policy guidance, and collaboration with public and private entities. Engaging these organizations helps ensure that emergency procedures address the diverse needs of all passengers and align with ADA or ACA standards.

evacuation from transit vehicles: The process of safely clearing passengers from transit vehicles and, when necessary, the broader transit system.

impairment: A specific physical, sensory, cognitive loss, difference, or limitation in body structure or function. An impairment may or may not lead to disability.

mobile medical equipment: Portable devices people may use to support medical needs. This equipment can pose safety risks during emergencies by obstructing evacuation routes or increasing the risk of fire or explosion and requires careful handling during evacuations to ensure passenger safety and continuity of care. Examples include portable oxygen concentrators, ventilators or respiratory support systems, suction devices, IV poles, and medication pumps.

people with disabilities: The ADA defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment. A person with a disability may have one or multiple impairments that span physical, cognitive, or sensory impairments.

personal mobility device: A device that support a person's mobility. These devices may require specific considerations during evacuations to ensure safe and efficient passenger evacuation. Examples include manual or power wheelchairs; scooters; walkers, crutches and canes; gait trainers; and specialty support equipment.

physical impairment: A condition that affects a person's mobility, strength or overall physical function. Physical impairments may limit a person's ability to evacuate a transit vehicle independently or efficiently during an emergency. People with physical impairments may require additional support and guidance from trained personnel to ensure a safe and timely exit. Examples include wheelchair users; people using canes, crutches or walkers; people with limited strength, balance or coordination; and people with prosthetic limbs or spinal cord injuries.

sensory impairment: A condition that affects the ability to receive or interpret sensory information, such as sound, sight or environmental cues. Sensory impairments can impact a person's ability to detect warnings, navigate unfamiliar surroundings, or follow evacuation procedures. Examples include vision, hearing and tactile impairments.

service animals: As of March 15, 2011, the ADA defines service animals as dogs that are trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities. Though the ADA's official definition of a service animal is limited to dogs, ADA regulations require public entities to make reasonable modifications to allow the use of miniature horses trained as service animals.

Service animals should not be separated from their handlers during emergency evacuations. If separation occurs, they should be reunited as soon as possible to ensure the person's safety and effective evacuation. Types of service animals include the following:

- Guide animals assist people with visual impairments by helping the handler avoid obstacles, indicate steps or curbs, and navigate traffic.

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- Hearing animals assist people with hearing impairments by alerting them to sounds in the environment.
- Alert or response animals alert a person that a medical condition is going to happen and/or assist a person after a medical episode, such as a seizure or blood sugar fluctuation.
- Mobility assistance animals assist people with balance, strength and/or mobility issues.
- Emotional support animals provide emotional or therapeutic support to people with an emotional or mental health condition. However, ADA regulations do not recognize emotional support animals as service animals, and emotional support animals may require permission to accompany people in public settings.
- Psychiatric service animals assist a person by mitigating a psychiatric disability, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

rescue equipment: Specialized tools and devices to assist in the safe evacuation, transport or protection of people during emergencies. Rescue equipment must be properly stored and maintained to ensure immediate accessibility while keeping evacuation routes clear and unobstructed. Examples of rescue equipment include evacuation chairs and sleds, stair descent devices, wheelchair lifts and ramps, transfer boards and belts, and tactile signage and wayfinding systems.

universal design: The design of equipment, environments and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design is the implementation of a process that improves the quality of life and greatly improves independence by enabling and empowering a general, yet diverse, world population to achieve optimal human performance, health and wellness through equal access to all facilities and social participation. For more information about universal design, see APTA SUDS-UD-GL-010-20, “Transit Universal Design Guidelines.”

Abbreviations and acronyms

ACA	Accessible Canada Act
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
AODA	Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act
CapMetro	Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Austin)
DART	Dallas Area Rapid Transit
DME	durable medical equipment
EMS	emergency medical services
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
OCS	overhead catenary rail
PACE	primary, alternate, contingency, and emergency
PCA	personal care attendant
WMATA	Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

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