

# **Focus on Fire Safety Solutions for People with Disabilities**

Report on Meeting, September 4 and 5, 2002  
Washington, D.C.

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NFPA Center for High-Risk Outreach

## Background

The national and international fire protection organizations that make up the North American Coalition for Fire and Life Safety Education met in 1997 to discuss the need for a concerted effort to reduce persistently greater fire deaths and injuries among high-risk populations. In April 1999, the coalition sponsored *Solutions 2000*, a symposium that brought the fire safety and advocacy communities together to address these concerns. The coalition's recommendations specifically targeted young children, older adults, and people with disabilities, focusing on education, engineering, and enforcement.

*Beyond Solutions 2000*, a second symposium sponsored by the NFPA Center for High-Risk Outreach and funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), was held in April 2001 to measure progress made on the first symposium's recommendations and to develop an action plan universal to the targeted high-risk groups. This plan specifically addressed the need for all fire safety and advocacy agencies to take collective responsibility in the areas of egress capability, early warning, and fire sprinkler protection.

In September 2002, the Center for High-Risk Outreach sponsored another meeting, *Focus on Fire Safety Solutions for People with Disabilities*, to act on those portions of the plan which specifically address people with disabilities. Sharon Gamache, executive director of the Center for High-Risk Outreach, and Michael Collins, executive director of the California State Independent Living Council, co-chaired the two-day meeting, at which representatives of organizations that participated in the previous symposia met to develop a strategy to improve fire safety among people with disabilities.

The attendees' goal was to, "In collaboration with organizations that share a mission of life safety or that advocate for people with disabilities, develop a strategy and action plan that will enable people with disabilities to improve their level of fire and life safety." To do this, they must meet several objectives:

1. Recommend fire safety messages and materials for the education, protection, and evacuation of people with disabilities.
2. Identify new opportunities and methods of disseminating information, including the use of organizations that can accomplish this most effectively.

3. Identify potential funding sources for safety campaigns targeted at people with disabilities.
4. Develop a national strategy to encourage the use of fire safety solutions.

During the meeting, Jennifer Dexter, a senior government relations specialist, and Sara Brewster, who is with Easter Seals in Chicago, presented evidence from *s.a.f.e.t.y. first*, a community-based program that provides evacuation planning and support. Then attendees participated in facilitated discussions to set priorities and agree on the actions needed to achieve the objectives.

Participants also agreed to establish a steering committee to monitor progress toward achieving the objectives and to refine the recommended actions for achieving the goals, as necessary. The participants' recommendations for the Steering Committee are presented in the following work plan.

## ***Work Plan***

### ***I. Education***

#### **A. Increase public education efforts that focus on prevention first.**

##### **Action**

1. Implement all actions recommended in this report in concert with efforts to increase understanding of the need for prevention.

##### **Discussion**

People with disabilities may require additional time or help escaping from a fire or extinguishing a clothing fire. Because fire can develop very quickly, it is imperative that they know how to prevent a fire in the first place and understand the safe practices to follow, based upon their abilities.

#### **B. Provide education and training that includes prevention, protection, and escape strategies for people with disabilities. Make such materials available in alternate formats, such as Braille, interactive tactile (charts, games, props), music,**

**CD-ROM, audio, closed captioning, and languages other than English. Include outreach to various cultural and ethnic groups. Encourage the use of working smoke alarms.**

### **Action**

1. Meet with representatives of advocacy groups to develop criteria for training and educational materials.
2. Share current projects and materials with the NFPA Center for High-Risk Outreach to post on its Web site.
3. Assemble a group to review materials and make recommendations.
4. Select materials for distribution to the public, including people with disabilities.
5. Find funding for adaptation, conversion, and distribution of materials.
6. Publicize the application process to become adjunct professors at the National Fire Academy (NFA).

### **Discussion**

Conduct a literature review of current programs and materials to determine what is needed to address fire safety for people with disabilities. Adapt or develop public education programs that can meet the needs of high-risk groups and ensure that those developing these products and materials are familiar with various types of

disabilities and address them in their output. Programs should increase awareness of the size and impact of the fire problem among the target population by including information, such as statistics, that highlight it; promote the acknowledgment of personal responsibility for safety; and emphasize acceptance of the consequences of one's behavior. Recommend that those who have disabilities or their advocates be added to the instructor pool at the NFA. To do this, share NFA instructor criteria with disability groups.

### **C. Recommend procedures for extinguishing clothing fires involving people with mobility disabilities.**

#### **Action**

1. Share research findings by linking advocacy groups to the Web sites of various research organizations, such as the National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST), the American Burn Association, and the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC).
2. Recommend ways to extinguish clothing fires based on research, including the best choice of fabrics and materials for fire blankets.

## **Discussion**

Because some people with disabilities are limited in the way they can react to a clothing fire, preventing such fires is of the utmost importance. Additional research, based on behavioral issues, is needed, and funding sources should be linked to research projects.

Promoting the use of flame-resistant clothing and a change in the way products are designed and made, such as fire-safe cigarettes, is also important. (See Recommendation IV.B regarding fire-safe cigarettes.)

### **D. Investigate human behavior in fire so that all strategies for improved safety are scientifically based.**

#### **Action**

1. Ask NIST to create a grant for human behavior research in fires, focusing on high-risk groups.
2. Contact the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Research Council of Canada to determine the scope and status of research currently underway.



## **Discussion**

Ask NIST to create a grant to conduct research on human behavior in fires, focusing on high-risk groups. Share results of studies conducted at the University of Wisconsin and the research that measured the impact of 9/11. Determine the scope of current projects being conducted by the National Research Council of Canada and the CDC.

E. Include fire safety issues for people with disabilities in training programs for first responders. This should include sensitivity; 9-1-1 registry and call back features; and adaptive measures for evacuation.

## **Action**

1. Distribute guidelines and training programs currently in use.
2. Disseminate Easter Seals' project *s.a.f.e.t.y. first* training package.

## **Discussion**

Some improvements have been made in training first responders to meet the needs of people with disabilities. Review successful training practices and materials, and develop a CD to distribute to

first-responders. With the CD, develop a solid policy paper that establishes needs and commitments. Just as advocates for people with disabilities must be included in the development of educational materials directed to the disabled community, first responders must be included in the development of training packages directed to them

## ***II. Engineering***

**A. Increase the use of working smoke alarms. Encourage design that incorporates multiple alarm features identifiable by persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Consider features that may appeal to consumers, such as universal (inclusive) design, different cost and availability options, 10-year batteries, communications chips, and decorative features that meet the requirements of NFPA 72, *National Fire Alarm Code*<sup>®</sup>.**

### **Action**

1. Write letters to manufacturers detailing concerns.
2. Identify scope and status of current initiatives underway at CPSC and other organizations.

## **Discussion**

Inform advocacy groups of current research and findings on smoke alarms currently underway at such organizations as NFPA, NIST, and the CPSC. Involve the Trace Center, the University of Wisconsin, and Gallaudet University in identifying research needs.

## **B. Resolve conflicts in regulations, such as those governing hardware in residential settings and latch-side clearance requirements.**

### **Action**

1. Draft a letter to HUD from the Steering Committee to inform the agency of the group's concerns and ask HUD to act on them.

### **Discussion**

Conflicting regulations interfere with accessibility and safe evacuation.

### **III. Enforcement**

#### **A. Influence code development.**

##### **Action**

1. Develop a one-page plan and recommendations for influencing codes and standards.
2. Determine code adoption opportunities at the state level.
3. Notify the members of the Steering Committee when positions become available on code committees.
4. Inform individuals and organizations not familiar with the codes- and standards-development process of the opportunities for submitting revision proposals and participating on committees. Describe the process in lay terms and distribute these guidelines to the disabled community. Share the opportunity for public comment about the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) with participating organizations.

## **IV. Advocacy**

### **A. Advocate for fire safety.**

#### **Action**

1. Develop a goal statement for the Steering Comm.
2. Develop talking points for each initiative so that advocates at all levels can share them with the media.
3. Develop a public policy package.
4. Invite representative from the media to serve on the steering committee.

#### **Discussion**

As one participant noted, “The same message coming from the unexpected messengers would enhance our ability to win battles.” Everyone should become conversant on, and active in, the following issues:

- Residential sprinklers, both new and retrofits
- Fire-safe cigarettes
- Flame-resistant clothing
- Smoke alarms
- Tax credits for increased protection
- Improved signage
- Code adoption and enforcement at the local level
- 9-1-1 registry and call back features
- Public hearings and policy

## **B. Promote the use of fire-safe cigarettes.**

### **Action**

1. Work with local chapters of the Phoenix Society and with NFPA to support state legislation and programs to increase community awareness.
2. Draft a position paper, with supporting data, from the Steering Committee.

### **Discussion**

Groups advocating for people with disabilities can join existing coalitions to promote fire-safe cigarettes. The Phoenix Society has experience and supporting information it can share. Inform the community and organizations representing people with disabilities that this issue is paramount to the fire problem.

## **C. Promote universal design of products and devices.**

### **Action**

1. Identify funding sources, such as the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) grants.
2. Work with the Center for Universal Design (CUD) on agreed upon issues.

## **Discussion**

Ask expert organizations, such as CUD, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Adaptive Environments, NIST, and the Trace Institute at University of Wisconsin, to join groups representing people with disabilities to advocate for universal design.

Attachment A.....Agenda

Attachment B.....Directory of Participants

**Focus on Fire Safety Solutions for People with Disabilities**  
**Sponsored by the NFPA Center for High-Risk Outreach**

September 4th and 5th, 2002  
Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill

**Agenda**

September 4, 2002

- 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. Meeting Registration and Continental Breakfast
- 9:00 – 9:30 Introductions and Background
- 9:30 – 10:30 The Problem and The Status of Protection  
*Meeting Co-Chairs:*  
Michael Collins, Executive Director, California State Independent Living Council  
*Sharon Gamache, Executive Director*  
*NFPA Center for High-Risk Outreach*
- 10:30 – 11:00 Break
- 11:00 – 12:30 p.m. Session One: Messages and Materials  
*Identify recommended materials and messages for the education of people with disabilities about fire safety.*

*Facilitators*

*Doug Towne, Executive Liaison*

**Disabilities Relations Group**

*Bev Gilbert*

**Office of the Fire Marsha, Ontario,  
Canada**

**Edwina Juillet**

*Consultant, Fire and Life Safety for People with Disabilities*



12:30 – 1:30 p.m. Lunch

1:30 – 3:00 Session One Continued – Messages and Materials

3:00 – 3:30 Break

3:30 – 5:00 Session Two – Methods  
*Determine partners and opportunities for disseminating information.*

September 5, 2002

8:00 – 9:00 a.m. Continental Breakfast

9:00 – 9:45 Easter Seals S.A.F.E.T.Y. First  
*A community based program that provides evacuation-planning support.*

*Jennifer Dexter*  
*Senior Government Relations Specialist*

**Easter Seals**

*Sara Brewster*

**Easter Seals, Chicago IL**

9:45 – 10:30 Session Two Continued

10:30 – 11:00 Break

11:00 – 12:30 Session Three – Strategy  
*Develop a national campaign to increase awareness of fire safety and use of recommended means for protection and escape.*

12:30 – 1:30 p.m. Lunch

1:30 – 3:00 Session Three Continued

3:00 – 3:30 Looking Ahead

## Adjournment

# Focus on Fire Safety Solutions For People with Disabilities

September 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002

Hyatt Regency Washington

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