



Guide to Expanding Mitigation

MAKING THE CONNECTION TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



FEMA



Photo: Mother and daughter hugging.
Cover Photo: Female friends sitting on a sideboard talking and laughing.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The term “disability” in this Guide refers to activity limitations and participation restrictions. It includes:

- Physical disabilities.
- Developmental disabilities.
- Mental health disabilities.

Disabilities may be visible or hidden.

This Guide uses the person-first term “people with disabilities.” Many people within the disability community use identity-first language. Different people have different approaches to disability and identity. It’s best to ask how people describe themselves.



Photo: Wheelchair basketball athletes at practice.

One in four people in the United States live with a disability. People with disabilities often experience greater risks during disasters and struggle more to recover. That makes mitigating their risk even more important. Mitigation plans and projects can break down barriers and make the community safer and healthier for all.

Many community organizations focus on meeting the diverse needs of people with disabilities. Others work on reducing disaster risk. However, these issues are not always integrated. Many efforts to support the disaster-related needs of people with disabilities focus on preparedness and response, not long-term risk reduction. Bringing these issues together and focusing on risk reduction promotes community resilience.

This *Guide to Expanding Mitigation* discusses the importance of including people with disabilities in hazard mitigation. It explores disability issues and provides ways to include disability concerns in mitigation planning and implementation.



This *Guide to Expanding Mitigation* is part of a [series](#) highlighting innovative partnerships for mitigation.

The following Guides may provide additional context and a deeper dive into related topics:

- [Making the Connection to Equity.](#)
- [Making the Connection to the Whole Community.](#)
- [Making the Connection with Public Health.](#)
- [Making the Connection to Transportation.](#)

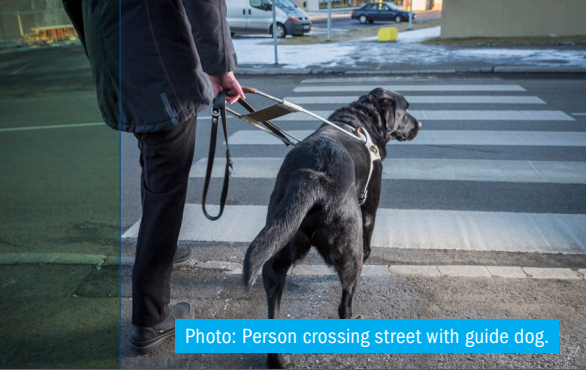


Photo: Person crossing street with guide dog.

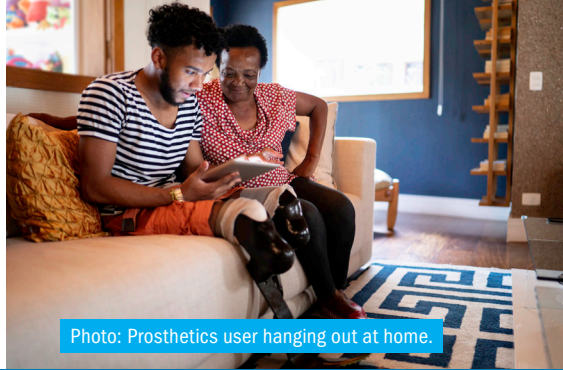


Photo: Prosthetics user hanging out at home.



Photo: Walking with support in physical therapy.



Photo: Reading using Braille.

PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HAVE IMPORTANT PERSPECTIVES ON HAZARD MITIGATION

Disasters reveal and amplify injustice for people with disabilities, as well as for others. Our infrastructure and other basic systems are not built considering the needs of the whole community. This leaves people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs struggling to obtain resources available to many others. When disasters occur, these gaps can be deadly. We must include people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs in the mitigation planning process. Mitigation efforts are ideal opportunities for reducing inequities while advancing resilience for all.

WHAT IS THE ADA?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law in 1990. The ADA makes it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities.

Title II of the ADA requires state and local governments ensure that all people can access their services and programs. This includes schools, transportation, recreation, public meetings, social services, and more.

The ADA sets a minimum standard to avoid excluding people with disabilities. All mitigation projects and processes must meet ADA requirements.

CONSIDER THE BROAD RANGE OF STRUCTURAL BARRIERS AND ACCESS NEEDS FROM THE START

There are many kinds of disabilities. The needs of individuals with mobility challenges are different than the needs of individuals with developmental disabilities, chronic illness or mental health challenges. Communities are often not designed for people with disabilities. Disaster response frequently uses a “cookie cutter” approach that excludes people with disabilities, as well as those from other historically disenfranchised groups, and these categories often overlap. Mitigation planning is a chance to make connections between people with disabilities and community leaders, planners and emergency managers. Consider a range of access needs when writing Hazard Mitigation Plans and developing mitigation projects.

Disabilities and hazard mitigation planning and vulnerability assessments

Mitigation plans must describe each community’s vulnerabilities to hazards. Often, the consideration of disability is limited to listing critical facilities (including care facilities) and noting if they are in a hazard zone. Most people with disabilities, however, do not live in care facilities. Resilience requires a big-picture view that connects related issues.

Consider the ways hazards may affect people with various kinds of disabilities. Extreme heat, cold, and weather events may present additional hazards for people with disabilities. Car-centric environments may pose challenges for people who rely on public transportation. Integrating your planning processes is one way to include disability and resilience in all community plans. The following plans and others can promote resilience for people with disabilities:

- Land use plans.
- Comprehensive plans.
- Climate plans.
- Transportation plans.

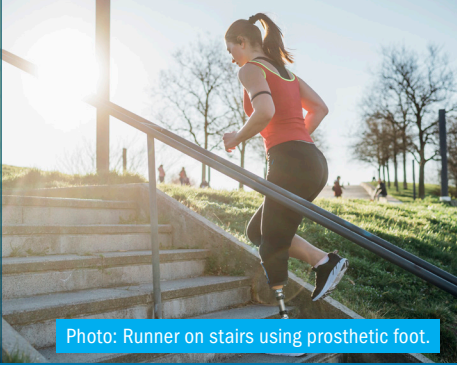


Photo: Runner on stairs using prosthetic foot.



Photo: Wheelchair user with family.



Photo: Blind person uses Braille in an elevator.



Photo: Young adults hanging out against a fence.

MITIGATION APPROACHES TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Disasters have an unequal impact on people with disabilities. Mitigating the impact of hazards and reducing risk can greatly improve outcomes for people with disabilities. Also, many mitigation projects intended for people with disabilities have additional benefits for the general population. This guide explores four categories of hazard mitigation:

- Planning and regulations.
- Natural systems.
- Stakeholder engagement and community outreach.
- Structure and infrastructure.



Planning and regulations

Long-term land use decisions can make communities either more vulnerable or more resilient. While many communities focus solely on locating medical and care facilities outside high-risk areas, most people with disabilities live in residential neighborhoods, including areas at risk. Studies have found that people with disabilities are more likely to live in the floodplain. Consider the ways changes to land use planning and codes can enhance resilience for people with disabilities. Do residents need cars to access their day-to-day needs? This leaves them vulnerable during a disaster. Are housing regulations flexible? For example, can people with disabilities live in in-law apartments with family? Are building codes equitably enforced? Do people with disabilities and those living in poverty have access to safe and resilient housing? Investing in comprehensive planning efforts can allow for equity for the whole community during both sunny skies and disasters.



Natural systems

Nature-based mitigation projects protect the natural environment while reducing risk and providing other benefits. Often, they include parks and open spaces. If you are considering nature-based mitigation projects that will result in open space, involve local disability groups for their input on the design and use of the space. Consider ways to go above and beyond ADA requirements for parks. This can include level ground, frequent benches, clear signage and tactile paving that all residents can enjoy.



Structure and infrastructure

Consider physical accessibility for projects that enhance resilience. Many people with disabilities require electric power for mobility devices or medical equipment, making backup power even more important. Some states and programs have been able to combine funding sources to build accessibility into mitigation. After Hurricane Katrina, residents used Louisiana's Road Home program to raise homes and to apply for separate funding for chair lifts. Costs for accessible mitigation may pose challenges. Stacking grant sources and other creative funding ideas can help bridge those gaps. People who have disabilities are a valuable resource for offering additional ideas for enhancing accessibility and resilience.

MANY CONVENTIONAL MITIGATION STRATEGIES DO NOT FIT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Elevating structures can make them inaccessible to people who use mobility devices. Ramps and elevators can help, but they may be expensive.

Safe rooms are often in basements and are rarely physically accessible.

Costs can be a major barrier for people with disabilities. Many can't accumulate savings, or they will lose eligibility for crucial government programs. In addition, renters may not be able to invest in mitigation for properties they do not own.



Stakeholder engagement and community outreach

For planning and projects, include people with disabilities, along with advocacy and service organizations. If people with disabilities are not currently part of your planning teams, consider expanding who is at the table and leading the conversation. Community leaders (especially planners and emergency managers) who have disabilities may have already developed useful ideas. Reach out to advocacy groups, and plan for a long-term partnership.

In addition to including people with disabilities on the planning team, consider a wide spectrum of access needs when engaging the public during the hazard mitigation planning process:

- Sign language interpretation and/or live captions.
- Braille translations.
- Accessible fonts.
- Screen reader accessibility.
- Navigability of websites.
- Multiple modes of providing information (online, in print, in person, etc.).
- Plain language.
- Avoiding graphic images that trigger negative reactions.
- Physical accessibility of meetings.
 - Can someone easily travel there without driving?
 - Can someone who uses a wheelchair access the meeting room and bathrooms?
 - Are there options for participating virtually?



Collaborating with people with disabilities yields broad benefits

Disability activists can be powerful resources for planning. Disasters cause access and communication problems for everyone, similar to the obstacles that people who have disabilities face every day. People with disabilities may develop creative solutions and ideas that expand the possibilities for everyone.

Hazard mitigation and climate planners often discuss “co-benefits.” Those are the additional benefits a project may provide. For example, adding trees and green space may reduce both flooding and urban heat islands. A similar concept in disability communities is “universal design.” These are environments designed to be accessible to all. Communities can combine these ideas to build far-reaching resilience. Consider the multiple benefits of the following mitigation projects:

- Accessible parks, sidewalks, and complete streets will support families with young children and cyclists. They will also support people with mobility impairments.
- Backup power for elevators and medical equipment is essential during a power shortage. Solar power installed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can also fuel backup batteries.
- Accessible communication benefits everyone. These include:
 - Multiple modes of outreach.
 - Translation and interpretation.
 - Live captioning and plain language.

LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed problems for people with disabilities. While the public health field understood the issues, many communities were taken by surprise. Some concerns that came to the forefront are:

- **Transportation and accessibility:** Many COVID testing and vaccination centers were in accessible buildings, but people could not get there without a personal vehicle.
- **Housing:** The COVID-19 pandemic solidified housing as a public health issue. Many people have become more aware of how important housing is during an emergency.
- **Accessible communication:** Many communities have struggled to provide clear information to the whole community, including those with access and functional needs.
- **Clear sidewalks:** Many restaurants set up outdoor dining on the sidewalks. This created physical barriers for many people with disabilities.

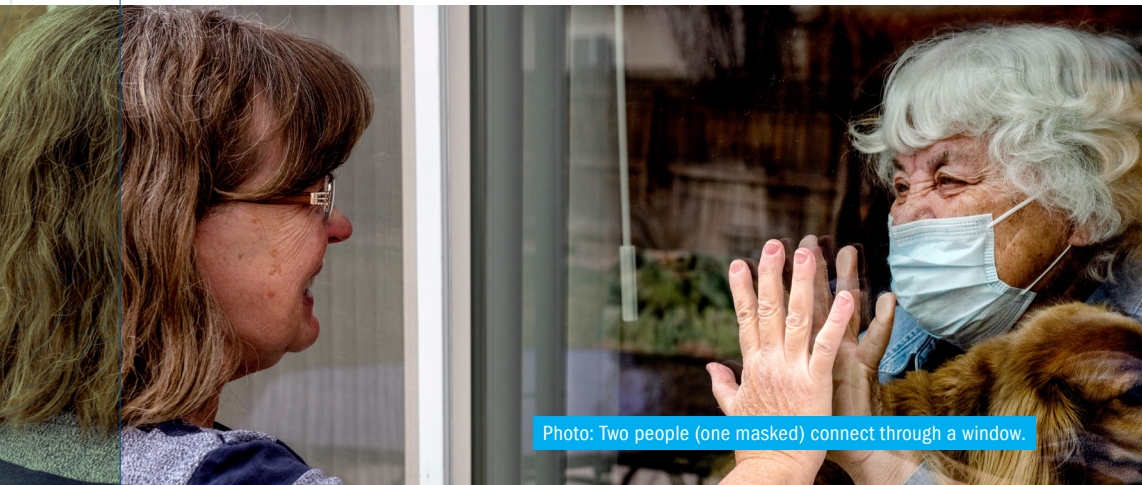


Photo: Two people (one masked) connect through a window.



Disability organizations and resources

People with disabilities are a varied and diverse group. No one person or group can speak for the needs of all. FEMA's Regional Disability Integration Specialists can provide information on local groups. Contact [your FEMA region](#) for more information. Local centers for independent living may also be useful resources. The [National Council on Disability](#) writes policy statements and papers, including on emergency management. Topics on Emergency Management include:

- [Effective Communications for People with Disabilities: Before, During, and After Emergencies.](#)
- [Preserving Our Freedom: Ending Institutionalization of People with Disabilities During and After Disasters.](#)

FEMA provides many resources on [hazard mitigation planning](#). Consider reviewing the full series of [Guides to Expanding Mitigation](#) for more ideas and connections.



Photo: Wheelchair user navigates through library.



ENGAGE WITH US

Are you a state, local, tribal or territorial official interested in making the connection between people with disabilities and hazard mitigation? Are you a disabilities professional interested in connecting with local officials to reduce risk from hazards? Please contact us at FEMA-ExpandingMitigation@fema.dhs.gov.

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