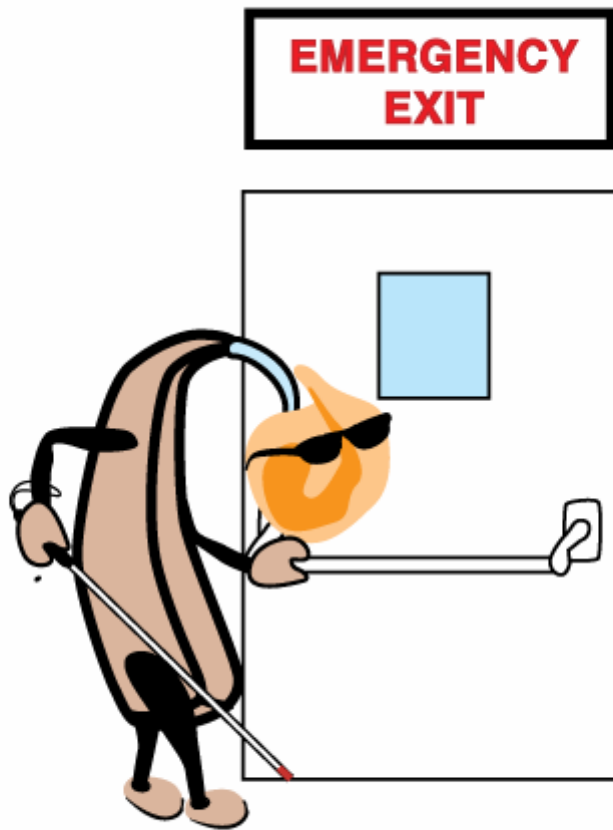


## Chapter Eight

# Emergency Preparedness



## **Why is Everybody Running? Emergency Planning for Young Adults who are Visually and Hearing Impaired**

*Valerie Chmela*

Beginning a new job or college can be a very exciting time. There are so many new people to meet and experiences to be had. For deafblind students it may also be a little scary to have their family and friends so far away. Even if the student lives at home there are so many more grown-up responsibilities. It is important for deafblind students to always remember that they have the power to keep themselves safe even when not at home. All that is needed is a little information and some practice, and deafblind students can be safer than many of their dorm mates or co-workers who never give much thought to safety concerns.

Below is a brief story; identify the different ways this deafblind person made mistakes.

It's Friday afternoon. Work or classes are finished for the week, and Student-X rushes home to her dorm room or apartment. It's now time for some serious relaxing! So, she walks into her room and drops her book bag in a corner of the room. Both her cane and Braille Notetaker are inside her book bag. Student-X doesn't bother with clipping the receiver to her alert system onto her belt because she can never remember where she put it last; and besides, she is always forgetting to recharge it.

Next she spends the next few hours playing computer games, chatting on-line and instant messaging with her friends. She is planning to go out to the pizza place in a few hours to meet her friends. She decides to dress up a little before heading out so she goes through her closet to pick out the perfect outfit. She throws clothes all over the place, but it's okay. She knows that she has the whole weekend to clean up.

Suddenly an alarm is rings inside her room but she doesn't know it because she doesn't have her alert system hooked up. Soon she begins to smell smoke, but she figures that someone must be burning popcorn again since that happens all the time. A few moments later, someone begins banging on her door, but she can not hear them. However, she soon feels it – heat – and now she really smells smoke and

begins to panic. Is the building on fire? She rushes out into the hall, but feels the intense heat and it pushes her back inside her room. She wants to call for help, but can not find her notetaker to place the call. She decides to try to escape out the window, but it will not open and her room is on the third floor. She wonders how she will get downstairs to safety. She begins to think about the firemen and when they will come to her rescue.

This is not a true story, but it easily could be if a deafblind student didn't know what to do for protection. The truth is that every deafblind student is responsible for his/her own safety. That doesn't mean the deafblind student is alone, but she will need to set up her own plan to keep as safe as possible in emergency or disaster situations. If one thinks about the story, there are many things that Student-X could have done to have kept herself safer. The first step would have been to think about safety at the time she was assigned her dorm room. Some deafblind students may be better off on the first floor or on the second floor of a dorm. Making a safety ladder available so that those deafblind students who are able to climb out the window can do so may also be a useful safety measure.

When an emergency happens, deafblind students often times are left with no escape because the student may believe she is very familiar with her home surroundings and does not need to keep her cane or communication devices nearby while at home. When evacuating a building quickly, a deafblind student often cannot find the things needed for a safe exit. This is why it is important to assemble an emergency bag. An emergency bag is different than what is called a Disaster Kit, which will be explored later in this chapter. The emergency bag is designed to help the deafblind student make a quick exit and to be ready in an emergency. Like an emergency in the middle of the night when the vibrating fire alarm goes off. It is a good idea for the deafblind student to keep her emergency bag under her bed or on the bedpost where it can be easily grabbed when quickly exiting the building, as would be the case if there was a fire in the building. What is in an emergency bag? What are the things a deafblind student should have in her emergency bag? It is best to begin to assemble the bag with the following items:

- A folding cane. The deafblind student can use it to break the window if the student can't get out any other way. The cane can also be used by the student to find her



The collapsible or folding cane can be used to break a window if no other solid objects can be located.





Whether in the dorm, at the work site or when traveling, every student should have a signaling system that alerts the student when the fire alarm is activated, the alarm clock goes off or someone knocks on the door.

Another emergency precaution the deafblind student will want to set up is some type of personal alert system inside her dorm room. In the story above, people were banging on the door and the smoke alarm was going off. If Student-X had been wearing a vibrating alert system, it would have given her information about the smoke alarm going off or indicated that the people were ringing her doorbell. However, this device needs to be charged, and the deafblind student must clip it onto her waist as soon as she enters her dorm room. There are also personal alert systems that can be purchased which hook up to the telephone. This type of system has a waterproof button that can be worn around the neck. If the deafblind student needs the police, an ambulance, or the fire department, she can press the button and a person will call for help. When the system is initially set up, the student will be asked for medical information and contact names of family members so, that when an emergency situation arises, this information can then be pass onto the police who will contact the student's family. Connect America has a web site where students can explore which option works best for them.

### **Cases of Natural Disaster**

Using any of these things could have helped Student-X get out safely during her example emergency, but what about a disaster like a hurricane or a tornado? What would Student-X do in a natural disaster? First, it is important for the deafblind student to set up a circle of support; these are people that the student asks in advance if they would be willing to give the student assistance in the event of an emergency or disaster. These people can be neighbors, the residence advisor, friends and family, or campus police. People in the student's circle of support will not come and save the student, but instead may be able to help search for her. The deafblind student is also encouraged to set up a communication chain to be used during a disaster. When family cannot be reached, a relative in another state can be contacted on behalf of the deafblind student. That family member can pass information along to the student's parents.



It is important for the deafblind student to know how to locate the Emergency Exit in each building where classes are held. Also, it is important to be aware of the safest and closest route to use when exiting a building in the event of an emergency.

It is really important for the deafblind student to contact the local fire department. All across the United States, the local fire departments are responsible for emergency and disaster response. It helps to inform them about the deafblind student's support needs, communication systems or other pertinent medical information. Furthermore, the fire department will need to know where the deafblind student is currently living and how to best communicate with the student in an emergency or during a disaster. Often times in a disaster situation, people need to evacuate, which means leaving quickly. The deafblind student may not have time to collect all of her belongings to bring along. The fire department personnel will enter the deafblind student's home or dorm to retrieve the student and maybe a small bag - but that is all. The deafblind student may want to ask the local fire department about disasters such as tornados, wild fires, or hurricanes that may be common to the area where her college is located. The deafblind student should ask the fire department the best way to evacuate the dorm or classroom building and the best way to protect herself if a disaster occurs while she is outdoors.



Having a flashlight handy is very important in case there is a power outage.

If the student is attending college or at the workplace, school administration or work supervisors should be asked about their disaster plans for people with disabilities. What will the deafblind student be expected to do? Where are fire exits located in each building? Do the stairwells lead directly outside or to a place that is familiar to the student? If someone tells the student to stay in one place and wait for help, the student should always ask for alternate plans or request that someone help her make an individualized plan for escape. In a disaster the deafblind student needs to have an action plan; sitting and waiting is not a good idea.

Knowing that a disaster is happening or about to occur is very important as well. The student should explore resources that can be used in different types of emergencies or natural disasters. The NOAA weather radio can be investigated at any of these sites: [WeatherRadios.com](http://WeatherRadios.com), [HomeSafe Inc.](http://HomeSafe Inc.), [Silent Call Communications](http://Silent Call Communications), or [Harris Communications, Inc.](http://Harris Communications, Inc) A list of URLs for these companies is provided at the end of this chapter. The NOAA weather radio can be set up anywhere, and can be set to a particular county or area. If a tornado is in an area, the radio will flash an alert message. It can be read under a CCTV, hooked up to a pillow or clip-on vibrating alert system, or hooked to a flashing strobe. When the alert happens, the deafblind student can check on the NOAA website; type in her zip code to find out what is going on. Along with that, the deafblind

student can also sign up for free emergency email service, such as Emergency Email & Wireless Network. This service will inform the student of severe weather and can alert her via e-mail, two-way-pager, fax, cell phone, or other wireless devices such used by the deafblind. The student can decide which specific alerts she wants at the time she activates her subscription.

There is so much more that students can investigate to learn how to keep themselves safe at home, at school and in the workplace. The American Red Cross website or the Gallaudet University Accessible Emergency Notification and Communication website have a lot of very good resources and both are updated frequently.

The most important thing for the deafblind student to remember is that she holds the power to make her life the best it can be. Whether the deafblind individual is working or attending college, she can choose to make herself as safe as possible and a good action plan is all that is needed.

### **Internet Resources**

American Red Cross: [www.redcross.org/](http://www.redcross.org/)

Connect America: [www.connectamerica.com](http://www.connectamerica.com)

Emergency Email & Wireless Network: [www.emergencyemail.org](http://www.emergencyemail.org).

Gallaudet University - Accessible Emergency Notification and Communication  
<http://tap.gallaudet.edu/Emergency-Resources.htm>

Harris Communications, Inc.: [www.harriscomm.com/](http://www.harriscomm.com/)

HomeSafe Inc.: [www.homesafeinc.com/](http://www.homesafeinc.com/)

NOAA website: [www.weather.gov](http://www.weather.gov)

Silent Call Communications: [www.silentcall.com/](http://www.silentcall.com/)

WeatherRadios.com: [www.WeatherRadios.com](http://www.WeatherRadios.com)