

Good planning is essential to getting out safely with a disability

Consider surroundings and abilities of yourself and your caregivers when planning a fire escape route

Having a disability presents additional challenges when you have to evacuate from a building. The key to making a safe escape is to be prepared with a well-thought-out plan on how to get yourself to safety, either on your own with the assistance of a caregiver.

When coming up with an escape plan, focus on the abilities you and any caregivers have to escape a fire. When there's a fire, how will you get out? Will you require any special assistance or devices to get out that need to be included in your plan? This could be assistance from your caregiver, a neighbour, a roommate or a family member.

In making your plan, consider these four elements:

- **Notification:** How will I learn if there's an emergency and where that emergency is? This could come from a smoke or carbon monoxide alarm, a building alarm system (audible or visual strobe), another occupant or a passerby.
- **Route:** What are the safest escape paths out of the home? Do I have two or more options? If I live in a building with an elevator, will it stop working in the event of a fire alarm?
- **Escape:** Can I escape by myself or do I need assistance? If I require assistance, what kind of assistance do I need?
- **Timeliness:** If I need assistance, will that assistance allow me to escape my residence within three minutes? If not, do I need to re-evaluate my plan and/or the life safety provisions of the residence? Should I be living in a residence that has built-in fire protection?

Remember: when it comes to understanding your needs, you are the expert. Be sure to communicate any special assistance you may require to caregivers, firefighters or other first responders at the time you make your plan. Discussing your potential emergency needs with the fire department in advance can ensure everyone knows what to do when an emergency arises.

Have an escape plan and make sure that everyone knows their role in that plan. While fire departments always recommend you have two ways out, sometimes that's not possible or practical for those with disabilities due to the building type and design.

If you are unable to escape through a secondary route, your plan needs to include what you or your caregiver can do to protect yourself in your residence. The plan should include:

- Where to go (bedroom, bathroom or a balcony?);
- How to seal the room from smoke; and
- How to call for help to let the first responders know where you are, that you are safe and that you require assistance.

If special equipment is required by the fire department or others to help with your escape, make sure it's noted in the plan and then communicated to responders at the time of the emergency so it's brought to your residence.

Practise the plan to make sure everyone who has a role knows what is expected of them. If your plan requires help from a caregiver, all caregivers you interact with should practise the plan to ensure they, and you, are familiar with the plan.