Making Emergency and Public Safety Information Accessible to the Public

Acknowledgements

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1.0 Introduction

Background

One of the goals of Ontario's Integrated Accessibility Standards Regulation (IASR), is to ensure organizations' publicly available emergency information is accessible to everyone.

By providing your emergency and public safety information in an accessible format or with communication supports, persons of all abilities will have the equal opportunity to access emergency information and prepare in case of an actual emergency.

In this guide we use the term 'customer' to describe any member of the public who has access to an organization's goods, services or premises. Depending on your organization's business you may use a different term such as client, member, patient, constituent, parishioner, congregant, patron, consumer or third party organization.

How will this Guide Help Me?

This guide will help you understand:

- if the IASR's accessible emergency information requirement applies to your organization

- what your organization is required to do

- the types of emergency and public safety information that are affected

- how to respond to requests for accessible formats

This is not a guide to developing emergency procedures for persons with disabilities; it is about how you communicate that information to your clients, customers and other visitors to your organization.

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2.0 Requirements

Does the Requirement Apply to my Organization?

- Do you prepare emergency procedures, plans or public safety information?
- Do you make them available to the public?

If you answered 'yes' to both of these questions, then you need to make your emergency and public safety information accessible to people with disabilities when requested – by January 1, 2012

What is my Organization Required to do?

- Notify the public that you can make your publicly available emergency information accessible, upon request
- When the information is requested, work with the individual to determine their needs
- Provide the information in an accessible format or with an appropriate communication support as soon as possible and at no additional cost

The Regulation does not require organizations to develop or create new emergency or public safety information.

3.0 Steps to Consider

It's up to your organization to determine how to make your emergency related information accessible to the public when it's requested. The following steps may help your organization be prepared to readily meet requests and keep your customers and employees safe in the event of an emergency.

Identify the emergency and public safety information you make available to the public

Consider the emergency information related to your organization and distinguish which is available to the public and prepared prior to an emergency. These are the items that the regulation applies to. The differences between prepared and real time information can be summarized as below:

- **Prepared information**: items that are formulated prior to an emergency situation and could include things such as evacuation plans, public safety brochures or signage.
- **Real time information**: items that become apparent at the time of an emergency and could include alarms or announcements.

When considering emergency information it can be difficult to distinguish between emergency plans and emergency procedures – the terms are sometimes used interchangeably and often incorporated into a single document. Rather than try to define what is X or Y it is best to simply determine what information is publicly available and has been prepared in advance to address any and all emergency situations, or the general safety of the public.

3.0 Steps to Consider

Determine where barriers exist

Barriers in your emergency procedures, plans and public safety information are obstacles that would make it difficult — maybe impossible — for people with disabilities to effectively respond to an emergency. For example, a hotel client who is blind would not be able to understand or follow a hotel's fire evacuation procedure if it is simply posted as a map on the hotel room door.

Think about what people with different types of disabilities may need and whether the current presentation of your emergency and public safety information would impact their ability to understand it.

Here are some suggestions to help you develop your approach to identifying barriers:

- Consider the needs of people of all abilities
- Review feedback from customers
- Consult with persons who have disabilities about their needs
- Consult with your staff who deal with the public

3.0 Steps to Consider

Identify various options for making the information accessible

In most cases, providing an accessible format or communication support need not be a complicated or time-consuming task. Below is a list of common information formats in which your emergency or public safety information may be currently available . . . along with some possible solutions for accessibility.

Emergency / Public Safety Application	Existing Format	Ways to make it accessible
Emergency plan or procedures	Written document	Create a structured electronic file* These files can be used to produce a web page or shared via email allowing people to use their assistive device to interpret the information. It can also be reproduced in large print, Braille or an audio (DAISY) version
Emergency evacuation map	Graphic	Produce a tactile map or written description of emergency elements and evacuation routes
Regulatory, prohibitory warning signs	Signage	Use larger text, pictograms, strong colour contrast and tactile elements
Emergency procedure training for visitors	Video or orally presented	Provide captioning, text description or an oral/visual presentation appropriate to the person's needs. For example, you may want to use sign language interpreters

3.0 Steps to Consider

When thinking about accessible formats and communication supports, it is important to consider what your organization is capable of and what it will be able to accomplish 'as soon as practicable' if the information is requested.

Organizations will need to consider factors such as the complexity and the amount of information being provided, the format being requested, and the resources and internal capacity of the organization to determine what is possible.

In some cases, organizations will be able to meet requests for accessible formats and communication supports instantly. For example, an organization may instantly send an electronic file to a customer through email, or provide an instant communication support by reading information aloud. In other cases, the request may take longer to process.

While you are not required to have accessible formats or supports on hand, The regulation requires organizations to provide accessible formats or communications supports 'upon request'. However, acting ahead offers a number of benefits. It allows you to:

- meet a request more quickly and efficiently
- be better prepared in the event of an emergency
- demonstrate a commitment to safety for your clients, customers and staff that will reflect positively on your organization.

*Tip: Make it a standard practice that any new documents are created as a structured electronic file. A structured electronic file includes information about the format of a document and its content. Using pre-defined styles for titles, headings, fonts, etc. rather than formatting them individually will make the document easier to interpret for someone using assistive technology. It also makes it easier for you to reproduce the document in a variety of alternate formats - like large print, Braille or an audio version.

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Where to find more information

- The Emergency Preparedness Guide for People with Disabilities/Special Needs provides information to help employers understand the various needs of people with disabilities in emergency situations; provides information on the best way to work with persons with disabilities in an emergency situation; and provides emergency preparedness tips for people with disabilities. http://www.emergencymanagementontario.ca/english/prepare/specialneeds/specialneeds.html

- Accessible Information and Communication: A Guide for Small Business provides a comprehensive overview of how to provide information in accessible formats. The Guide can be accessed at www.gaates.org/aic/

- Connect with organizations that could help with emergency planning, such as the fire department or organizations representing people with a specific disability.

- Local organizations that serve the community of persons with disabilities such as the Canadian Paraplegic Association (CPA), the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) or the Canadian Hearing Society (CHS).

- Persons with disabilities themselves can also be a great resource when developing accessible formats and testing their effectiveness.

- Visit the Government of Ontario website for more information, tools and educational resources to help you meet your obligations under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) at www.Ontario.ca/AccessON

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Examples

Example 1
A printing company is updating their emergency response plan. They had the foresight to become familiar with the style commands on their word processing software before writing the plan. When a client with low vision who regularly attends meetings at their office requested information on emergency planning they were able to provide an electronic version that he was able to efficiently use with his screen reading software.

Example 2
A theme park provides a safety brochure in their main office on what to do in the case of an emergency. As an organization dedicated to ensuring all individuals can enjoy the park, management decided to produce the document as a structured electronic file and had a number of copies printed in large print and Braille

Example 3
A not-for-profit organization is hosting a public meeting for members in their office. When they send out an invitation to the event, they ask individuals to let them know if they have any accommodation needs. A number of individuals are Deaf and use American Sign Language (ASL). The non-profit decides to bring in an ASL interpreter for the event.

Example 4
A medical lab resides in a building that has a number of warning and regulatory signs, as well as emergency evacuation maps . Recognizing that public safety information may be requested in accessible formats they took the initiative to upgrade the accessibility of the signage. New signage incorporated tactile information, stronger colour contrasts and better use of pictograms.