

# Guidelines for Working with People with Functional Needs

Compiled by

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## ***Basic psychological first aid***

- Make a statement of **empathy** within the *first 30 seconds*. For example:
  - “I know this is difficult for you”
  - “Looks like you’re having a tough time”
- **Introduce** yourself  
If you have a title within an organization, people will expect you to be competent until you prove otherwise
- Be **respectful** from the start
  - Use “please” and “thank you”, “sir” or “ma’am”
  - Address people by Mr., Mrs., or Ms. and their last name
  - Use last names until given permission to use first names
- People do best when they can take some sort of **action** themselves
  - People in crisis want to be participants, not spectators
  - Give the person some task to accomplish
  - Allow people to make their own decisions, even if they ask your opinion
    - Remember that a decision that would work well for you, may not work for someone else

## ***People who are hard of hearing or deaf***

- Not all people who are hard of hearing or deaf use sign language
  - They may use spoken language, visual communication or sign language
- Get the person’s attention by tapping their shoulder or waving your hand
- Speak clearly at a normal rate of speed and volume
- Make sure your mouth is clearly visible
  - Only 30-35% of language is visible by lip-reading, yelling distorts the face, making lip-reading more difficult
- Use gestures if at all possible, make sure your non-verbal communication matches the message you are sending
- Offer pen and paper. Write notes to make sure the communication is clear
- If you will be with the person for a length of time (i.e., in a shelter or family assistance center), ask if the person would like a qualified sign language interpreter

## ***People who are deaf-blind***

- Mark an “X” on the person’s back or shoulder (universal communication) to indicate there is an emergency and that he/she should trust you and follow you

- Use printing on the person's palm (capitol block letters), making sure your finger remains in constant contact with the hand until you complete the letter
- Provide assistance when moving in an unfamiliar location

### ***People who are blind***

- Blind and visually impaired persons have widely varying levels of independence skills. Some will need no more help than a sighted person, while some with less skills will need more help
- A minority of the blind use guide dogs and many do use white canes
- Do identify yourself verbally
- Do ask if they need help
- Do explain what you are doing
- Ask if they have any questions

### ***People with service animals***

- Only touch the service animal if the owner gives permission

### ***Seniors***

- Make sure they bring any assistive devices, such as walkers, canes, hearing aides (and batteries) and eyeglasses
- If the person has a vision loss, offer your arm for them to hold as you guide them to safety
- If possible, assist the person in gathering all medications, inhalers and nebulizers before evacuating. Remember that some medications, such as insulin, may be kept in the refrigerator
- Ask how to reach family/friends before evacuating, as the person may have family phone numbers programmed onto speed dial on a phone and may not remember phone numbers once outside the home

### ***People with mobility impairments***

Always ask the person how you can help before attempting any assistance. Every person and every disability is unique – even though it may be important to evacuate the location, respect the person's independence as much as extent possible. Don't make assumptions about the person's abilities.

- Ask if they have limitations or problems that may affect their safety.
- Some people may need assistance getting out of bed or out of a chair, but CAN then proceed without assistance.
- Here are some other questions you may find helpful:
  - “Are you able to stand or walk without the help of a mobility device like a cane, walker or a wheelchair?”
  - “You might have to [stand] [walk] for quite awhile on your own. Will this be ok? Please be sure and tell someone if you think you need assistance.”
  - “Do you have full use of your arms?”

## Wheelchair Users

- If the conversation will take more than a few minutes, sit down to speak at eye level.
- Ask before you assume you need to help, or what that help should be.

## ***Children***

- Children may need you to repeat directions, or answers to their questions, several times
- Validate the child's thoughts and feelings
- Reassure, but only promise what you can actually do (say "I'm here to help you", not "everything is going to be alright")
- Use digital or Polaroid photos to document children separated from parents
- Index the photos and provide a system for presenting select photos to parents (i.e., similar age/gender/ethnicity)
- Provide a site where arriving parents can review photos with privacy

## ***People with mental illness***

- If at all possible, arrange for the person to call their regular service provider or caseworker to provide for continuity of care
- Ask them to bring their medications with them if at all possible

## ***People who are agitated***

- Remember to start with a statement of empathy
- Try to find a point of agreement
- Act calm, even if you're not (keep your voice calm, maintain soft eye contact)
- Approach from the side when possible
- Speak in a calm, neutral tone of voice
- Intervene only during the lulls if the person is talking or shouting
- Maintain an L-shaped stance
- If threatened, get out and get help

## **References:**

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