

## Mentoring Program Checklist Series

### Emergency Evacuation Planning

The following important areas need to be considered in your Emergency and Fire Evacuation planning to ensure people who are Blind or have a Vision Impairment are supported appropriately in your workplace. This could be employees, visitors, clients or customers.

**Here are tips to support new and existing Employees with a vision impairment:**

- Human Resources introduces Fire Warden to new employee during first days of orientation. Conduct quick initial briefing about how the emergency procedures work in general and start discussion about what the new employee's individual needs might be. Develop a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) if deemed necessary.
- Fire Warden and/or Human Resources organises a 'buddy system' which:
  - explains that Fire Wardens will have minimal capacity to assist if there is a drill or an emergency however will regularly check that the buddy system is set up correctly and provide information and regular updates.
  - introduces the new and existing employees to a couple of people who will provide support needed in the event of an emergency drill or actual emergency. These might be people from the same team or work unit.
  - ensures the buddy system works with set ups such as hot desking, hybrid days in the office and any other processes that will assist in anticipating if there are challenges to providing support needed.
- Employees with a vision impairment and allocated buddies discuss best system and get support to practice soon after the relationship is confirmed. Following are suggestions of how a trial run could start. The Buddy takes the lead to:
  - Make sure Employee has their cane or support of Guide Dogs, Seeing Eye Dogs or Assistance Dogs.

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- Ask Employee with vision impairment the most appropriate way to hold arm of buddy/support person, to assist with an efficient evacuation.
- Assist Employee to the fire stairs.
- Check if Employee feels comfortable using handrail or needs other support going down fire stairs or evacuation route.
- Direct, if requested, hands of Employee to the handrails
- Provide stability, if requested, to walk down the stairs.
- Stay with the employee and check if they are comfortable or if they need any other assistance to evacuate the building.
- Support and stay with the employee at the emergency meeting place till more information is provided.

### **Background to above list**

Most people would probably agree that the procedures relating to fire drills and evacuations in general are an inconvenient but necessary part of workplace life. It is critical however to think about the different needs of the people who use your workplace. For a blind or vision impaired worker, customer or visitor there may be additional considerations relating to the actual logistics of the procedure.

For example, we know of instances during emergency workplace drills when employees, who are blind or have a vision impairment, were told to wait in certain areas and that someone who come to help them soon. No one returned to support these employees. The drill was over, and everyone got back to work. Lucky for these employees with a vision impairment that it was a drill and not an actual emergency.

A drill is where teams work together to support everyone and work out the best way to navigate evacuations. Stories about lack of support during drills for people with different needs are concerning. In preparation for drills and actual evacuations Occupational Health and Safety teams need to review on the following:

- Ask questions around the specific location of the office space or desk.
- Assess location of fire stairs, access and supports such as tactile features and contrasting colours.
- Check and consider if there is an appropriate lighting set up for all staff needs.
- Check regularly that evacuation pathways and passageways are always clear. This is extremely important for all staff, at all times.

The topic of evacuations and safety needs to be presented with the onboarding material when a new employee with a vision impairment commences work with an organisation. As outlined above we recommend scheduling a practical exercise with the appropriate wardens or allocated buddies in the first few weeks. This allows wardens to find out the needs of the new employee and the new employee also finds out about the different evacuation procedures. If induction courses and other training are held off-site, an actual walk through needs to be experienced so that blind or vision impaired employees become familiar with the spaces, surfaces, signage and sounds of the external and internal meeting places in case of an actual fire or other emergencies.

Blind and vision impaired employees should be introduced to a number of wardens or responsible workmates/buddies in case of illness, holidays or other leave commitments on the day or changes in personnel between events.

If Guide Dogs, Seeing Eye Dogs or Assistance Dogs are involved, the extra high or loud frequencies of the alarms may affect an animal's work and behaviour. If this happens the blind or vision impaired employees may have to be escorted by sighted guide practices and support also provided for their dogs who should never be separated from their handlers.

As with all areas of employee support having regular informal discussions always produces the most productive outcomes. Discussion areas could include:

- Encouraging Safety Team, Human Resources, Wardens and Employees with a disability might like to develop a Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) to help everyone know what to do.
- Asking employees about their experience with emergency drills and training. Discuss what experiences worked well and what problems happened based on incorrect assumptions around their individual needs.
- Discussing options for best approach including appointing designated staff to provide assistance alongside support of wardens. We suggest a buddy system.
- Showing employees where the tactile ground surface indicators (TGSIs) are on the approach to fire stairs.

#### **Helpful links:**

- <https://evaculife.com.au/blog/evacuation-of-people-with-a-disability/>
- <https://www.jobaccess.gov.au/employers/evacuation-plans-employees-with-disability>
- <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-12/1991-tap-emergency-management.pdf>