

ESBLN Eastern Shore Business Leadership Network
Putting Ability to Work www.esbln.org
By Jackie Gast, Director

All businesses have emergency plans for their employees. All businesses practice fire or disaster drills with their employees regularly. Sure. Of course many businesses do have plans but too many do not. Or perhaps their plans are incomplete. Having a plan, and practicing it, is essential to employee safety.

According to the 2007 Disability Status Report for the United States, Cornell University, for Maryland, 25.9% of the workforce working full-time/full-year has one or more disabilities. In Delaware, that statistic is only 19.7%. Nationally, 1 in 3 people ages 65 to 74 have a disability. For those over 75, the number is 1 in 2 people. Yes, it is important to consider emergency plans that include people with specific needs, those with disabilities and elderly workers.

I recently spoke with an employer who has an individual with a physical disability who is unable to walk at a quick pace. He is not a wheelchair user. When practicing the company evacuation drill, this employee was unable to evacuate within the required time. A fellow employee volunteered to bring in a wheelchair from her home to be placed near the employee's workstation. In addition, since the employee with the disability is not used to a wheelchair, fellow employees made a plan as to who would help guide him the chair if the need arose. That plan was given to and accepted by management. The accommodation to help this employee, by the way, cost \$0. Also, consider the positive corporate culture in this company as these plans were employee driven.

The above noted employee is not elderly, however, many elderly may not move as quickly as they used to. Also think about employees who have temporary disabilities such as a broken leg, recent ankle surgery, etc. While your company may not employ anyone currently with special needs, it could happen in the future, it could be you, and you need to be ready.

According to the Center for Disability and Special Needs Preparedness, www.disabilitypreparedness.org, your emergency plan should include establishing two evacuation routes as one may be blocked; determining "safe areas" in case of a tornado or air raid. Include the fire marshal in designating those areas and ask if they have a register for people with disabilities at the station; determine relevant special needs for all employees including those with disabilities; emphasize to the employees that they need to be as self-reliant as possible and to assume responsibility for their own safety. One never knows what events can transpire in the event of a real emergency; make sure all employees are familiar with the company's emergency warning system. Be sure it is both visual and audio; most cell phones have GPS. In case of a building collapse, this could be critical in finding an employee's location; employees may want to consider keeping a kit of necessary supplies like insulin or other medications; consider language barriers including for deaf and hard of hearing.

Schedule the time this month to (re)develop a plan. It is well worth it.