



DEFINITION OF *SPECIAL NEEDS POPULATIONS*

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The definition of what constitutes or characterizes a person with a *special need* has been under debate in recent years by different organizations and government entities.

It is important for emergency planners and responders to understand the civil rights provisions that apply to *special needs populations* during emergencies. A starting point for this understanding is grasping some of the key principles that underlie civil rights legislation:

1. *No "one size fits all."* People with functional needs do not all require the same assistance, do not all have the same needs, and are most knowledgeable about their own needs. Thus, emergency planners should prepare for individuals with a variety of function-based needs by collaborating with community organizations that are knowledgeable about those needs and about the local resources that are available.
2. *Inclusion.* People with functional needs have the right to participate in, and receive the benefits of, emergency programs, services, and activities provided by governments, private businesses, and nonprofit organizations in the most integrated setting possible. In addition, the active involvement of community representatives during each phase of emergency planning will help to ensure the provision of appropriate support.
3. *Accessibility.* Emergency programs, services, and activities must have the legally required features and/or qualities that ensure entrance to, participation in, and usability by individuals with functional needs. Ensuring such accessibility may require modifications to rules, policies, practices, and procedures without charge to the individual.
4. *Effective communication.* People with functional needs must be given information that is accessible, understandable, and timely. To ensure that communication is effective, planners may have to provide additional support, such as sign language interpreters through on-site or video interpreting. Messages using simple language construction can reach individuals with cognitive disabilities, and foreign-language translations may be needed to reach residents with limited English proficiency.

The Department of Homeland Security Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties has established a functional needs definition rather than use of any diagnostic category based definition and other legislative, regulatory and policy making bodies have concurred.

Dane County Emergency Management (DCEM) embraces the principles described above along with the following values in its planning efforts around functional needs populations and people with disabilities:

- Promoting Personal Preparedness.
- Securing Functional-Needs Expertise.
- Formalizing Community Partnerships.

The functional needs perspective suggests that members of the special needs community may have difficulty maintaining independence, understanding communication, getting transportation, and keeping adequate supervision or medical care to meet their needs for maximizing independence and maintaining dignity. Dane County Emergency Management subscribes to a functional definition and perspective in planning accommodations. The *DCEM Special Needs Populations Unit* recognizes these challenges and, in working with our own committees and with disability advocacy groups in Wisconsin, we have established a special needs definition and erected a plan that addresses and accommodates individual needs. In short, our planning perspective is based on this definition:

Special Needs Populations –

“Any individual, group, or community whose physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, cultural, ethnic, socio-economic status, language, or any other circumstance that creates barriers to understanding or the ability to act/react in the manner in which the general population has been requested to proceed.”

We welcome comment on our definition and planning strategies. Please call DCEM and the Special Needs Populations Unit at 608-266-4330 or email: Steinhauer@co.dane.wi.us