



**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND HOMELAND SECURITY**



October 10, 2006

Letter sent to Municipal Chief Elected Officials & Emergency Management Staff

Over the summer months, the Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security has asked you to undertake several preparedness planning initiatives, including an assessment of your critical infrastructure and potential generator needs; and local commodity distribution planning following a disaster. We deeply appreciate all of the hard work you have been doing on behalf of the citizens of your community. As a next step, we are inviting you to join a state and local conversation and planning effort to establish ***universally accessible shelters***. Universally accessible shelters are congregate public shelters which are planned, equipped and operated to meet the sheltering needs of a wide variety of community members, including most people with disabilities and older adults.

The need to develop universally accessible shelters is largely driven by changing demographic realities. As Americans live longer and health care and personal support technology advances, a growing number of older adults and younger people with different types of disabilities are living independently in our communities. Further, in many communities, increasing numbers of people who are dependent on medical technology and frequent attention from skilled health care providers are living in their own homes. In developing emergency preparedness plans, local emergency management directors, town managers, and chief elected officials must consider the identities and needs of these growing segments of the population.

Most older adults and people with disabilities who are likely to seek public shelter during an emergency will require little more than physical and/or communications accessibility, coupled with reasonably flexible operating policies that reflect awareness of their needs. A smaller number may require assistance or care from others in order to perform routine activities of daily living, such as dressing, eating, getting in and out of bed, or using the bathroom. Some of these people will likely arrive at a shelter with their own assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs, scooters, walkers) or with other supports such as a service animal, neighbors, family members, friends, peer supporters or personal care assistants who will help them.

Given physical accessibility, sufficient space and flexible operating policies, people with these types of needs should be able to shelter successfully with their neighbors in a reasonably well equipped public shelter. However, others with similar needs may not be able to arrange to bring their own supplies or personal assistance networks with them. While even a "universally accessible" community shelter may not be able to meet the needs of all such individuals, anticipating their needs and engaging in thoughtful planning will assure that, to the maximum

extent possible, people are not needlessly separated from their neighbors or family members, and that their health and safety is protected.

We recognize that developing plans to meet the needs of people in such a variety of situations is a daunting task. We also recognize that resources and circumstances vary from community to community, and that assessing the accessibility and capabilities of facilities, modifying policies, obtaining relevant information, and identifying particular resources and helpful connections all take time and, in some cases, particular expertise. A statewide working group is currently developing a draft concept of operations plan and guidelines to assist local communities in developing universal shelter access for their residents. This working group includes representation from the Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security; the Department of Public Health; the Red Cross; UCONN Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities; the Office of Protection and Advocacy; the Department of Social Services; local emergency managers and hospitals.

Enclosed is a document from the U.S. Department of Justice entitled An ADA Guide for Local Governments: Making Community Emergency Preparedness and Response Programs Accessible to People with Disabilities. The electronic link for this document is: <http://www.ada.gov/emergencyprepguide.htm>. It addresses issues that effect persons with disabilities that you must consider as you re-assess your shelter capability at the local/community level including:

- ❑ Notification;
- ❑ Evacuation;
- ❑ Emergency Transportation;
- ❑ Sheltering;
- ❑ Access to medications, refrigeration, and back-up power;
- ❑ Access to mobility devices or service animals while in transit or during stays in shelters;
- ❑ Access to information.

Please consider the ADA Guide as preliminary guidance. As stated above, a number of government and advocacy groups are working together to develop a concept of operations plan and draft guidelines to share with local officials and emergency management directors. In addition, DEMHS will be printing a document entitled “A Guide for Including People With Disabilities In Disaster Preparedness Planning” which was developed by the Connecticut Developmental Disabilities Network. The guide is primarily intended for those involved in preparedness planning at the municipal and regional levels. It also contains information that is useful to persons with disabilities and their families. We will share both of these documents with you when they become available. We are also working to develop training and technical assistance initiatives to assist with:

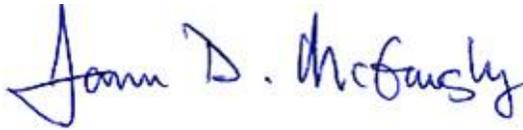
- ❑ Encouraging persons with disabilities and elders to develop personal preparedness plans and to anticipate needs for sheltering in place
- ❑ Educating the elderly and persons with disabilities about shelter options in their communities
- ❑ Educating first responders and shelter managers on how to evacuate persons with disabilities and the elderly
- ❑ Developing concepts and options for sheltering people who cannot meet their own needs and who do not bring necessary supplies or caregivers; and people who have intensive health monitoring and management needs.

We realize that the state of Connecticut has asked local municipalities to complete a great deal of emergency preparedness planning over the last year and it has been a challenge for all of you given your limited resources. However, we must be prepared to serve all citizens within our community who are living independently and will expect to seek shelter and services in times of a disaster. We view this initiative as a sustained, collaborative partnership, and look forward to working with you, your staff and organizations in your community to achieve this goal.

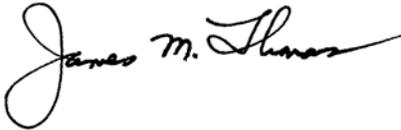
Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of J. Robert Galvin in black ink, including the text "M.D., M.P.H." below the name.

J. Robert Galvin
Commissioner
Department of Public Health.

Handwritten signature of James McGaughey in blue ink.

James McGaughey
Executive Director
Office of Protection and Advocacy

Handwritten signature of James M. Thomas in black ink.

James M. Thomas
Commissioner
Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security

Attachment: ADA Guide for Local Governments

cc: The Honorable Patricia Wilson-Coker, Commissioner - DSS
DEMHS Regional Coordinators
DEMHS Regional Planners