

Bay Area Disasters & Transportation: Preparation and Considerations

The Bay Area faces many potential disasters. Along with health emergencies like COVID-19, the Bay Area faces earthquakes, wildfires, extreme heat events, and flooding from storms as well as rising sea levels for all coastal areas. Communities, individuals and families need to be aware of the potential for disasters and plan ahead for all of our survival and well-being.

Natural disasters, health emergency crises, and climate change can impact transportation networks. Transportation networks are crucial for first responders during disasters. Transportation is required for evacuations and emergency vehicles reaching injured individuals, and provision of short-term and long-term supplies. Damaged transportation networks will need repairing, rebuilding or replacement. Longer term, we must address sea level rise along Bay and coastal areas, which can impact roads and underground rail segments. All of these issues can uniquely affect seniors and people with disabilities compared to the general public.

Disasters to Plan For

Public Safety Power Shutoff events (PSPS) occur when the power company (Pacific Gas & Electric) turns off the electricity, sometimes for as long as five days, to try to prevent or reduce wildfires caused by downed power lines igniting trees. These events are, of course, very disruptive but

will likely continue for the coming years, due to a combination of poorly-maintained equipment, inadequate tree-trimming, and increasing wildfire danger from climate change. This impacts the operation and reliability of electrified transportation. PSPS events will also affect cell phones and other communication networks that support individuals' ability to attain transportation, such as calling paratransit, using a ride-sharing app or navigating with a smart phone-based map. These PSPS events can be life-threatening to people with disabilities who need power for their survival due to use of respirators, air-conditioning, and other powered devices and elevators.

Extreme heat events may change transportation patterns for some people. For example, some may need to avoid non-air-condition transportation, limit time outdoors at transit stops, or may need to find transportation to cooling shelters or places with air conditioning like public libraries.

Unexpected health emergencies – such as the Covid-19 crisis – can also make transportation services unavailable, limit operation of transportation services, and/or limit transportation ridership.

Community & Individual Safety Planning

All these factors impact people with disabilities and seniors in specific ways, and must cause individuals to plan for their own safety. Things that individuals and communities must consider include:

- Immediate evacuation from wildfires and floods will be difficult for seniors and people with disabilities, who are less likely to own

personal vehicles or have driver's licenses. Individuals should plan their evacuation in advance.

- Paratransit may evacuate those with enough advance warning of oncoming disasters, but paratransit will not be available in active danger zones like wildfires and floods.
- Individuals who depend upon personal assistance from a caregiver may be unable to quickly get help to leave their homes.
- Without advance planning, individuals who need wheelchair-accessible vehicles may be unable to attain proper transportation in an evacuation. People who are able to transfer to somebody else's (e.g. a neighbor's) inaccessible vehicle may need to leave mobility equipment behind as they evacuate.
- Seniors and people with disabilities often experience social isolation and have limited access to news information, particularly as both groups may have less access to the Internet, smart phones, and cable television. Thus, individuals should plan to receive timely information through the news, social networks or a phone tree.
- Some seniors and people with disabilities may be especially affected by extreme heat. Some people with diabetes, circulatory conditions and spinal cord injuries have difficulty regulating their temperature and may be at risk for heatstroke. These individuals should account for this when making transportation choices, for example, avoiding all outdoor stops or going to cooling shelters more frequently or earlier than is necessary.

Individual planning and preparation for people with disabilities, seniors and families is crucial. The Governor's disaster readiness program, *Listos*,

(“ready” in Spanish) includes information about personal planning for people with disabilities and seniors. <https://www.listoscalifornia.org/>. This program encourages this “4 Step” approach:

1. List “five trusted allies” and their contact information, including at least one outside the region with whom you could coordinate communication with your circles of people;
2. List your health needs, devices and medications that you would need either if you had to evacuate, or shelter in place;
3. Create one or more supplies kits (“go-bags”) with personal essentials, which you could grab if you needed to evacuate, to be stowed at your own and others’ homes, workplaces or cars. More information of disaster readiness is found here:
4. Make an evacuation plan by contacting your nearby neighbors if you need assistance with transportation. Register for “Alerts” that provide advance warning on your phone and email of potential emergency events, through either PG&E or your county.

Exercising the Right to Community Support

Disability advocacy organizations and municipal groups are working to develop measures well beyond the “do-it-yourself” approach to disaster survival for people with disabilities and seniors. These populations, by law, are entitled to greater community support and assistance, affording specific provisions for inclusion and accommodations. But regulations have not yet been fully developed or implemented with respect to disasters.

For further information see, “California Is Not Adequately Prepared to Protect Its Most Vulnerable Residents from Natural Disasters” – California State Auditor Report 2019