

Minimizing Risk For The Physically Challenged At Waterside Mall

#6100150

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

This audit was initiated to evaluate the Agency's efforts to accommodate the physically challenged in and around Waterside Mall (WSM). The objectives of the audit were to: (a) evaluate whether the WSM emergency evacuation plan adequately addresses the special needs of the physically challenged; and (b) identify what the physically challenged consider to be significant architectural, physical, and communication barriers at WSM. Our review included a survey of EPA Headquarters employees having mobility or sensory-related physical challenges.

BACKGROUND

Emergency preparedness programs are critical to ensuring the safety and security of federal employees and visitors. Most recently, in a June 1995 Executive Memorandum, the President directed an assessment of all federal facilities to address safety concerns raised by the April 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. At about the same time, the Secretary of Labor affirmed federal managers' responsibility to ensure that an emergency plan is in effect for each workplace and that it is frequently updated. The EPA Administrator is responsible for the overall disaster preparedness program for EPA which includes taking steps to safeguard more than 5,000 EPA employees and contractors at WSM.

The Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 were enacted to make buildings more accessible to the physically challenged. In 1990, Congress estimated that some 43 million Americans have one or more physical or mental disabilities, and stated that ". . . individuals with disabilities continually encounter . . . the discriminating effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers"

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

WSM Occupant Emergency Plan Not Current Or Comprehensive

While EPA has developed an Occupant Emergency Plan (OEP) for WSM, we found portions of it to be out-of-date or lacking specificity. Detailed evacuation procedures were not outlined in the OEP or communicated to physically challenged staff. Seventy-six percent of the physically challenged survey respondents who work at WSM said they did not know what to do in case of an emergency. Staff needing assistance were not aware of monitors assigned to them and the OEP did not assign monitors to individual physically challenged staff. The list of key evacuation personnel was not current. It was being updated at the time of the Safety, Health, and Environmental Management Division (SHEMD) facility inspection in August 1994 and it was still being updated in December 1995. The list finally given to us in February 1996 was not complete or accurate. There are no stairwell, elevator, or exit monitors designated. The list included only two of the five physically challenged survey respondents that indicated they need assistance. One special assistant assigned to help physically challenged staff in her area was transferred to another WSM location six months ago. Evacuation test results were not documented and annual training for key personnel has not been conducted. Several monitors told us they had not had any training in more than five years. Building evacuation procedures had not been posted or communicated to all EPA WSM employees. These problems, taken as a whole, could have a negative

impact on the Agency's ability to safely and quickly evacuate personnel in an emergency. This places all EPA employees, particularly its physically challenged staff, at risk.

The problems which we found were primarily due to the OEP not being updated and no formal process established to update, test, and obtain approval of the WSM OEP on an annual basis. During our review, the Facilities Management and Services Division (FMSD) began to update the WSM OEP; provided supplemental information which has improved the OEP; and made plans to test and communicate the plan.

Results Of Survey On Accommodating The Physically Challenged At WSM

In the past five years EPA and GSA have resolved major barriers to accommodate the physically challenged at WSM. Actions reported by FMSD include installing automatic doors, adding braille to the instructions on elevators, making curb cuts and ramps, providing scooters, and providing accommodations to make shuttle buses, restrooms, and the fitness center more accessible.

The results of the survey show that additional changes, which are not necessarily required, could be made to make WSM safer and more accessible to the physically challenged employees and visitors. One-third of the survey respondents believed that the barriers identified in the survey pose a danger to their health and safety. Many of the respondents also believed that the access barriers have impeded their job performance or caused unnecessary delays. Our report prioritizes barriers based on how often they were encountered by the most respondents. The survey has also identified barriers which may violate accessibility standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommended that the Acting Assistant Administrator for Administration and Resources Management (OARM): (a) incorporate more detailed standard procedures into the WSM OEP and tailor these procedures to meet the special needs of the physically challenged; (b) update and assign responsibility to the emergency plan organization staff--including stairwell, elevator, area, and handicap monitors; (c) post appropriate evacuation procedures and diagrams of routes in the hallways; (d) communicate portions of the OEP and general building emergency evacuation procedures to WSM staff; and (e) perform and document a detailed evaluation of the annual evacuation test and conduct annual training of the occupant emergency organization.

As a result of our survey, we recommended the Acting Assistant Administrator, OARM: (a) obtain additional information on the location of specific barriers and the concerns of individual physically challenged staff at WSM; (b) provide General Services Administration (GSA) our final report and request that a building inspection be performed to assure compliance with the Uniform Federal Accessibility Standards (UFAS); (c) make easy and inexpensive changes to barriers based on the survey results and incorporate other appropriate changes into a planning process; and (d) incorporate portions of the UFAS checklist into SHEMD's inspection process.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OIG EVALUATION

Formal written comments were not received in response to the draft report. Informal discussions with Office of Administration staff indicated that they generally agreed with most of the report's recommendations, but disagreed with some of the findings and conclusions.

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