

# Evacuation — Getting out of Harm's Way

## Why talk about evacuation?

At any time of the year, at any time of the day or night, a natural disaster, a terrorist event, an industrial accident, or the threat of one could force you to leave your home, workplace, school or even the community in which you live. This is called **evacuation**.

Sometimes, it is best to take shelter in your home or whatever building you happen to be in, as discussed on the "**shelter-in-place**" page. But at other times, it may be safer to evacuate and leave the immediate area or the entire region. You may need to go to an emergency shelter, a motel, or the home of a friend or relative outside the affected area. It is important to think ahead of time about where you would go.

Thinking ahead will make evacuation easier, safer, and less stressful. Here are just a few questions to help you get started:

- If a disaster occurred while your spouse was at work and your children in school, how would you get in touch with one another? What if the telephones weren't working? To be prepared, every household should have a family communication plan as part of their **family disaster plan**.
- Have you considered your transportation options in case you have to evacuate? If you do not have a car, find out ahead of time about your community's plans for people without private vehicles.
- If you were stuck in a traffic jam or ran out of gas, would you have enough to eat and drink until help arrived? Make sure you have what you'd need for at least three days by putting together a **disaster supplies kit**.
- Have you thought ahead about your pets? Because evacuation shelters generally do not accept pets, plan ahead to ensure that your pets will have a safe place to stay. Do your research early. For more information on protecting your pets when disaster strikes, visit this **Red Cross webpage**. (Service animals trained to provide assistance to an individual with a disability **are** permitted in shelters.)

## How do I know if an evacuation is happening?

The basic guidance is the same for all: Listen to the advice of local officials. Then, if options are available, decide whether it is better to leave the area, stay with a friend or family member who does not live in the affected area, or go to a public shelter.

You will hear from the local police, emergency coordinators, or government officials on the radio or television.

Local officials may direct people to an emergency shelter. If so, they will tell you how to get to the shelter. The shelter will have most supplies that people need. You should also bring your disaster supplies kit. Be sure to bring any medications you are taking.

You may need to act quickly. Prepare **before** an emergency by making evacuation plans and discussing them with your household members. Learn about your community's warning systems and evacuation routes. This is the best way to be ready in case evacuation becomes necessary.

If there is a "code red" or "severe" terror alert under the Homeland Security Advisory System (see box, below), you should pay close attention to radio or TV so you will know right away if an evacuation is ordered for your area or if you should shelter-in-place.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security uses a color-coded Threat Level System to communicate with public safety officials and the public at large so that protective measures can be implemented to reduce the likelihood or impact of an attack. The **Homeland Security Advisory System** can place specific geographic regions or industry sectors on a higher alert status than other regions or industries, based on specific threat information.

## What if my children are in school?

Schools are required by law to have plans for sheltering and evacuating students. If you do not know what your child's school has planned, you should contact the school and ask.

You should not try to get to the school if the children are being sheltered there. Getting to their school may be difficult or impossible. You may not be allowed to enter the building. And transporting your children from their school may put them, you, and others at increased risk.

### Get prepared — your evacuation checklist

#### If you learn an emergency is taking place or may take place:

- Listen to a local radio or TV station. Follow the instructions of local emergency officials. Local officials will have the best advice for the situation at hand.
- Evacuate immediately if told to do so by authorities. Officials do not ask people to leave unless they think that lives may be in danger.

#### If local officials advise an immediate evacuation, grab your disaster supplies kit and go:

- Act quickly and follow the instructions of local emergency coordinators, law enforcement personnel, fire departments, or elected officials. Every situation can be different, so local officials could give you special instructions to follow for particular situations.
- Put your emergency plan for your animals into action: take your pets with you when you leave, provided you can do so without endangering yourself. You may not be able to come back for them later, as it may be too dangerous to return. But remember, only service animals are permitted in most evacuation shelters.

#### If local officials have not advised an immediate evacuation, you may have

## time to get ready to evacuate:

- Put your disaster supplies kit in your car or by the door if you are being picked up or are leaving on foot. In some situations, it is better to leave by foot than wait for transportation. Carry what you can, selecting the items most essential to your health and safety, such as medications.
- Tell your out-of-town contact in your family disaster plan where you are going and when you expect to get there. Relatives and friends will be concerned about your safety. Letting someone know your travel plans will help relieve the fear and anxiety of those who care.
- Keep your pets inside with you so you don't have to look for them if you have to evacuate. Make sure they are wearing collars and identification tags. If you have large, unusual, or numerous animals, start evacuating them as soon as you are aware of impending danger. If you are using a horse or other trailer to evacuate your animals, move early rather than wait until it may be too late to maneuver a trailer through slow traffic.
- Put on long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and sturdy boots or shoes.
- Gather important documents, such as:
  - Driver's license, passport and/or other personal identification
  - Social Security card
  - A list of all medicines you and family members are taking
  - Proof of residence (deed or lease)
  - Insurance policies
  - Birth and marriage certificates
  - Stocks, bonds, and other negotiable certificates
  - Wills, deeds, and copies of recent tax returns

## What if I don't have a disaster supplies kit?

If you don't have a disaster supplies kit, or you can't take one with you, at least try to take the following:

- First aid kit, including prescription medications, dentures, extra eyeglasses, and hearing aid batteries.
- A change of clothes, including sturdy boots or shoes, and a sleeping bag or blankets for each household member.
- Flashlight, radio, and water.
- Car keys and house keys.
- Cash and personal identification.

To be prepared for an emergency, **you should have enough water, food, clothing, and emergency supplies to last at least three days in case you can't reach a shelter.** In a catastrophic emergency, you might need to be self-sufficient for even longer.

Evacuating to an emergency shelter should keep you safer than if you stayed at home or at your workplace. Local officials will let you know when it is safe to leave the shelter and anything you may need to do to make sure it is safe to re-enter your area and home.

## **In closing...**

Evacuations are more common than many people realize. Hundreds of times each year, transportation and industrial accidents release harmful substances into the air, and thousands of people need to temporarily leave their homes, schools, or worksites. Fires and floods cause evacuations even more frequently. And almost every year, people along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts evacuate in the face of approaching hurricanes.

When community evacuations become necessary, local officials provide information to the public through the media. In some circumstances other warning methods, such as sirens or telephone calls, are also used. Government agencies, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and other disaster relief organizations and community-based organizations provide emergency shelter and supplies.

## **For more information, contact any of the following:**

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
- **Your local American Red Cross chapter**
- **Your state and local health departments**
- **The Humane Society of the United States**
- **Your local emergency management agency**
- **CDC Public Response Hotline (English 1-888-246-2675, Spanish 1-888-246-2857, TTY 1-866-874-2646)**

This page was last updated on Thursday, April 13, 2006.