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Fire safety for people with disabilities

Planning around individual abilities is important to fire safety. “If there is a disability, people should consider their special needs and how they could affect their ability to escape a fire in their home”, said Fire Chief Brian Gorski of the Sarasota County Fire Department.

Gorski also offers the following guidance in developing an escape plan:

- Every home should have an escape plan and all members of the household should practice it at least twice a year.
- Everyone should know at least two ways out of every room and every way out of the building.
- If a household member has a disability that requires special arrangements, make them part of the escape plan. For example, if a person cannot escape on their own, designate a member of the household to help and decide on backups in case the person isn't at home.
- It's especially important for people with limited mobility to sleep near an exit. If the home is multi-level, it's best to sleep on the ground floor and near an exit. Install a telephone extension in the room near the bed. Consider having ramps constructed for emergency exits.
- Install smoke alarms outside sleeping areas and inside the sleeping area of a household member with a disability. For those who have difficulty hearing, there are smoke alarms that flash a light as well as sound an alarm. There are also smoke alarms that sound a lower pitch alarm that may be easier for people with impaired hearing. Test smoke alarms monthly. Smoke alarms can be tested by using a broom handle to push the test button.
- Many fatal home fires happen at night. People who are unable to leave without assistance should call 9-1-1 and tell the dispatcher their location in the home. For people with cordless phones, try to keep the phone near at hand. Have a working flashlight near the bed because it will be of assistance exiting the building and can also signal firefighters if one becomes trapped by a fire.
- Disabled persons should not be allowed to smoke unless supervised by a caretaker or family member. All cigarettes should be discarded in approved containers. No one should smoke cigarettes while using oxygen.

“Planning around the abilities of household members and their needs makes sense for everyone's safety in a fire situation,” said Gorski. For more information, contact the Sarasota County Fire Prevention Office at 941-861-5000.

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