

Beyond the Precipice

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A few months ago I had the opportunity to be the test subject, otherwise known as the “crash test dummy”, in a test run of an emergency evacuation chair. The manufacturer or model of this particular chair is unimportant and would not have mattered. It was a harrowing experience!



I have a spinal cord injury and have been a wheelchair user for more than thirty years. As any wheelchair user, novice or veteran, knows, you never let your front caster drop off the edge of a step. If this happens, it could be catastrophic, possibly even fatal.

So when Allan pushed the evac chair forward beyond the precipice of the top step, I found myself seriously asking, “What I have I gotten myself into?”

This is a question that one does not have time to ask when the fire alarm is blaring, and smoke is filling the air. When all about you are losing their heads, how can you-and more

importantly, the person pushing the evac chair-, be expected to remain calm enough to get you both down the stairs and out to safety? To say this is challenging is an understatement.



My experience with the evac chair was under calm, controlled conditions, which is as it should be during a test run. It is only by virtue of this experience that I can get a true sense of that “lost in space” feeling as the chair goes where this man has never gone before. (Alright, I went through this once before. But that was a long time ago and I was much younger and more daring.) It was only through this kind of experience that Allan could find out what it’s really like to help someone who, in this situation, is almost totally dependent upon him.

Based on my first-hand awareness of what it’s like to be evacuated in an evac chair, and as chairperson of the Disability Access Review Advisory Committee (DARAC), I support the

draft provisions for “Stair descent devices” in [NFPA 101[®], Life Safety Code[®]](#) and [NFPA 5000[®], Building and Construction Safety Code[®]](#).

DARAC’s 3rd Annual Report included the following statement;

“The committee did not agree with the concepts of reducing stair width or for determining the number of stair descent devices that should be required. The committee voiced support for the Averill comment on 101-89 (Log#CP132) that, based upon careful and scientific investigation of the relationship between human dimensions, stairwell width, and stairwell performance, the 1975 work of John Templer clearly demonstrates the advantages of 56- inch (142.2-centimeter) stairwells over 44- inch (111.7-centimeter) stairwells. Given the trend of decreasing evacuation ability of occupants, 56- inch (142.2-centimeter) stairs would seem a reasonable minimum width. The committee also would like to see additional/modified criteria be added for these devices including:

- Operable by one person
- Have a brake
- Have straps for at least:
 - chest
 - waist
 - thigh/knee
 - ankle
- Have a carrying capacity of 350 pounds (158.7 kilograms)
- Brake must stop device within 12 inches (304.8 millimeters) of travel

As a society, we have learned a great deal about emergency evacuation of people with disabilities. We have learned from the World Trade Center disaster, the aftermath of hurricanes Rita and Katrina, and other situations where even the best laid plans went awry. We may not be able to prepare for every eventuality, but we are obligated to raise awareness, and bring about positive change where we can.

Abilities UNlimited, Incorporated was founded in 1988 to provide professional disability related consulting services with an emphasis on compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Fair Housing Amendments Act (FHAA).

Abilities UNlimited has worked with numerous public and private sector clients to help them better understand how the ADA & FHAA influences their facilities, services, and programs. AUI's goal is to give our clients the tools and knowledge that is needed to integrate all people into the mainstream of corporate and community activities.

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