

State-Based Disability & Health Program

Iowa Department of Public Health

Improving Emergency Shelters for People with Disabilities

Public Health Issue

Iowa's public health department provides assistance in the planning of accessible emergency shelters for the state's residents. For Iowans with disabilities, shelter accessibility is especially critical. Designated refuge centers, such as schools, are legally required to meet the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But in Des Moines, there was until recently only one elementary school, one middle school and one high school that met ADA accessibility requirements.

Program Overview

In 2011, the Disability and Health Program of the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) partnered with Polk County Emergency Management (PCEM) to evaluate disaster shelters for ADA accessibility compliance. IDPH surveyed each property and recommended temporary and long-term modifications to improve accessibility.

Making a Difference

The results of the shelter surveys prompted the Des Moines Public Schools System (DMPS), which houses several emergency shelters, to further evaluate its properties. DMPS requested that IDPH conduct needs assessments and surveys to guide improvements that would meet ADA criteria. As a result, DMPS committed to upgrading 62 of 63 district schools to make the facilities accessible for people with disabilities. Some of the changes include building elevators, adding additional parking and clear signage, and modifying bathrooms. The technical assistance provided by IDPH helped inform policy change and spur building renovations in the largest school system in Iowa.

Shaping Tomorrow

Affecting accessibility improvements in designated emergency shelters is a victory for all residents of Iowa. IDPH continues to partner with disability-related organizations and government agencies to positively impact the lives of people with disabilities.

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