ACUTA Alert: Areas of Refuge

In the Fall, 2009 *ACUTA Journal*, Contributing Editor Curt Harler wrote an article regarding the important topic of "Areas of Refuge" in campus buildings. The Legislative/Regulatory Affairs Committee would like to draw your attention to some key points in this article, and we urge you to read the entire article from the ACUTA webpage on the Legislation & Regulation page.

An Area of Refuge (AOR), also known in the Americans with Disabilities Act as an Area of Rescue, is a location in a building designed to hold occupants during an emergency, when evacuation may not be safe or possible. An AOR serves as a designated meeting point behind a firewall within a building, where disabled persons or anyone unable to evacuate can gather and await assistance or rescue.

An AOR requires an identifiable emergency lifeline link to a central station.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that an AOR system be included in all newly constructed multi-story buildings and public accommodations, as well as in existing multi-story facilities undergoing significant renovations.

The location and specific requirements for AORs are inconsistent and vary widely. They are generally prescribed by various local and state codes and are usually enforced by the fire marshal. It is important for ACUTA members to become knowledgeable about what is required in their locales. No dominant code-writing body has defined the complete AOR system or process.

AORs are generally defined in the International Building Code (IBC), the International Fire Code (IFC), NFPA 101 provisions of the National Electrical Code (NEC), and ADA. However, the local authority often has more specific rules on issues such as fire resistance, size of rooms, distance between AORs, smoke proofing, and separate ventilation.

Most companies that supply emergency equipment have systems to allow a person to punch a button and summon help.

As an example, the California Building Code, which is considered advanced, defines the need for two-way communication in an AOR with a central control point or the PSTN, including both audible and visible signals.

Common locations for AOR devices would be next to an elevator or in exit stairwells. Some municipalities require AOR devices on every floor above or below the main egress level. Others require them on every fourth or fifth floor above or below the main exit level. It is important to check your local code.

Technological means exist to avoid interruptions in service, such as battery back-up and fire-rated cabling.

Important equipment considerations include features as self-diagnostics (alerts when "out of action"), ability to call in and out, compliance with ADA standards, good sound quality and sufficient volume.

Codes will also specify the answering points, locations and connection requirements for AORs, and they vary by jurisdiction.

Since construction and renovation are constants on most college campuses, planning for AORs is an essential part of the design and construction process. It is essential to become familiar with national codes and standards and the requirements in your locale, and to develop a good working relationship with your local authorities that are responsible for enforcement. Proper attention to AORs and their associated communication systems could save lives on your campus in an emergency.

Legislative/Regulatory Affairs Committee