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Looking for a way out

Security evacuation for disabled; Dawson College forms task force to eliminate 'flaws' in plan

BY BRENDA BRANSWELL, THE GAZETTE OCTOBER 6, 2009



Maria Barile says Dawson College is more advanced than other schools in providing services to students with disabilities.

Photograph by: PIERRE OBENDRAUF, THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

When there was fear of a chemical spill at Dawson College in 2005, Myron Galan did what he's supposed to do during an emergency evacuation.

He made his way in his motorized wheelchair to the library entrance on the fifth floor near his cramped office and stationed himself in view of a security camera.

He waited there with two library employees. When a firefighter showed up five minutes later and asked what the procedure was for getting him out of the building "none of us knew - the elevators were not working," Galan recounted in a letter to the college's former head of plant and facilities.

It turned out to be a false alarm sparked by a student who pulled a prank with pepper spray, but it took nearly 25 minutes before Galan was removed from the building. Security guards couldn't get the freight elevator to work. Then, after a group of firefighters vanished, Galan said the guards struggled to carry him down the stairs.

There is no rancour in Galan's voice when he talks about the problem. He said he is more concerned for disabled students than himself.

"If they admit them to study here then they've got to be able to take care of them," said Galan, who teaches humanities and political science.

Dawson College recently formed a small task force to look at emergency evacuation to "at least identify the problems and work on the solutions" said college spokesperson Donna Varrica.

Their plan for safely evacuating people with limited mobility has worked well on paper, Varrica said.

"They are supposed to go to a certain place. There is a camera there. They're to wait until someone comes and takes them down a safe route."

"We've been now through three exercises in two years that showed the flaws of the plan," Varrica said, mentioning Galan's experience.

"There's confusion sometimes as to who does what."

It certainly isn't a challenge unique to Dawson since elevators in public buildings often get shut down during emergencies.

One good solution is knowing schedules of students with limited mobility so that staff know "more or less" where they're supposed to be, said Louise Desrosiers, a fire prevention chief with the Montreal Fire Department.

Ideally, during an evacuation two people should assist a person with reduced mobility, Desrosiers said.

One person, a "monitor" stays with them inside or near the stairwell and the other goes down to alert the security guard to their location, Desrosiers said. Firefighters won't evacuate people who have problems during a drill because they don't want to injure them, Desrosiers said. However, they are trained to carry people with reduced mobility from a building, she said.

A minimum of about 50 firefighters would respond to a call at a CEGEP within four minutes, Desrosiers added.

"What you also have to understand is that you're in a building that's protected by fire alarm system. There are heat detectors, smoke detectors in every stairwell. So it is well protected."

It's important that disabled people know what to do and that they wait for help in places that have been coordinated with firefighters, said Sophie Lanctot, executive director of Société Logique, a non-profit organization that promotes universal accessibility.

It was police who evacuated Dawson after a gunman opened fire in September 2006. When they got to his office, Galan said police suggested a student and colleague carry him out of the building. He nixed the idea and stayed put.

Galan isn't slamming Dawson, nor is Maria Barile who said she believes Dawson is probably a little

more advanced than other Quebec colleges in terms of services for people with disabilities.

Barile, who uses a wheelchair, is co-director of a research network dealing with students with disabilities that operates out of Dawson College.

She praised the Montreal fire department's program for people with limited mobility that allows them to alert authorities about where they live - information that is stored in a computer system.

"They know, for example, where my bedroom is in case there is a fire at night," Barile said.

As for the workplace, Barile and Galan are part of Dawson's new committee. She follows the same instructions as Galan during emergency drills, stationing herself in front of security cameras.

"Neither one of us feels very secure," Barile said.

"It's a constant concern every time there is a fire alarm ... a fire drill."

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