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**District of Columbia Sued for  
Failure to Serve People with Disabilities During Disasters**

A coalition of disability rights advocates filed a federal class action lawsuit today in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. The lawsuit challenges the District of Columbia's poor emergency planning for persons with disabilities, and comes on the heels of similar lawsuits in New York City and Los Angeles. Disability Rights Advocates, the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, and Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP represent United Spinal Association and the DC Center for Independent Living, as well as three individuals, Geraldine Hassell, Pamela Carreker, and Amber Keohane, in the lawsuit.

Matthew Handley of the Washington Lawyers' Committee said, "Like both New York and Los Angeles, Washington, DC has developed emergency plans that serve the general population during emergencies like hurricanes and terrorist attacks. However, also like New York and Los Angeles, the District fails to plan for the predictable needs of persons with disabilities. This is unconscionable."

The lawsuit alleges that the problems that exist range from the District's failure to publicize any information about accessible emergency shelters, failure to plan for emergency communications to persons who are deaf and blind, failure to put accessible evacuation options in place, and failure to plan for supply chain disruptions for medication and replacement durable medical equipment. Michael McManus of Drinker Biddle & Reath said "emergency planning is not only critical for the District's 72,000 residents with disabilities including veterans, but also for the various citizens with disabilities who regularly visit Washington, DC for work, school or recreational travel."

Alexandra Bennewith, Vice President, Government Relations in United Spinal's Washington DC office said "We represent persons with spinal cord injuries and disabled veterans in the District, and across the country. We're very concerned that wheelchair users are underserved in the nation's capital, and potentially in grave danger during the next disaster. We must do something now to fix this problem, before it is too late."

James Weisman, Executive Vice President and General Counsel of the United Spinal Association, said, "Our members who live in, work in, or travel to Washington, DC are in severe danger if a disaster strikes because the District has not planned for the foreseeable needs of people with disabilities in emergencies. Moreover, every year United Spinal brings over 100 wheelchair

advocates to Capitol Hill for meetings with their Congressional representatives to discuss disability issues. We are at a loss as to what we would do if something happened when this group was in town.”

Richard Simms, Executive Director of the DC Center for Independent Living, said, “If the District does not take swift action, people with disabilities will continue to face a disproportionate risk of death or serious injury during emergencies. This is unacceptable in any free society. We must do our very best to take care of all our citizens during times of crisis.”

“The lack of a specific emergency plan for people with disabilities is a matter of life and death for Washington, DC’s most vulnerable residents,” said Julia Pinover Kupiec of Disability Rights Advocates. “People with disabilities face the greatest risk during disasters and suffer tragic consequences when governments fail to develop emergency plans for all citizens. The District cannot afford to wait for another disaster to strike before taking action.”

**About Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs**

*The Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs for over 45 years has represented both individuals and groups seeking to vindicate their civil rights. It has handled over 5,000 civil rights cases, in employment, housing, public accommodations, and other aspects of urban life. It represents people with claims of discrimination based on race, gender, national origin, disability, age, religion, and sexual orientation. Leveraging its own broad expertise in discrimination litigation with the resources of Washington, D.C.’s private bar, the Committee’s litigation efforts have become nationally known for landmark court victories, record judgments, and precedent-setting consent decrees. Its capacity to mobilize the private bar has made it possible for the Committee to provide its clients with more than 50,000 hours of quality legal representation every year. More information can be found at [www.washlaw.org](http://www.washlaw.org).*

**About Disability Rights Advocates**

*Disability Rights Advocates is one of the leading nonprofit disability rights legal centers in the nation. With offices in Berkeley, California and New York City, DRA’s mission is to advance equal rights and opportunities for people with all types of disabilities nationwide. DRA’s recent work in the field of emergency preparedness for people with disabilities has resulted in a victory at trial in the class-action lawsuit challenging New York City’s failure to plan for the needs of persons with disabilities in large scale disasters such as Hurricane Sandy, a landmark ruling concluding that the City of Los Angeles violated the ADA by failing to meet the needs of persons with disabilities when planning for disasters, and negotiated agreements with Los Angeles County and the cities of Oakland and Richmond, California to ensure that their residents will be included in public emergency planning efforts. More information can be found at [www.dralegal.org](http://www.dralegal.org).*

**About Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP**

*Drinker Biddle & Reath is a national firm founded in Philadelphia over 160 years ago, with offices from coast to coast. The firm has a long history of pro bono work, and lawyers from Drinker’s Washington, D.C. office will be handling this case in conjunction with its Barbara McDowell High Impact Pro Bono Initiative, named for Barbara McDowell, a well-known public interest lawyer in Washington, D.C.*

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