

Hurricane planning for people with special needs

People with special needs should consider their capabilities and limitations, and the challenges they believe they will face in a disaster. It is important to remember that the usual methods of support and assistance may not be available during or after an emergency as occurred. Make a personal disaster plan to help organize necessary information and activities share your disaster plan with your support network. Keep copies of your disaster plan in your disaster supplies kit, car, wallet (behind driver's license or primary identification card), wheelchair pack or at work, etc. Other action steps to prepare for disaster are:

- Identify safe places to go. If local officials have not told you to leave the area, stay in the center of the building, away from windows. Avoid going to the lowest floor because hurricanes often cause flooding. If you are blind or visually impaired, use a long cane in areas where debris may have fallen or furniture may have shifted. This is recommended even if you do not usually use a cane indoors.
- Keep your service animal with you in a safe place at home or take them with you to a shelter. Bring along extra food and water for your animal.
- Find the location of main utility cutoff valves and switches in your home. Learn how and when to disconnect them during an emergency. Try to do this yourself. (Do not practice shutting off the gas.) If you cannot practice alone, arrange for someone from your network to help. Turn off utilities only if local officials tell you to do so or if you believe there is an immediate threat to life.
- Identify as many exits as possible from each room and from your building. Be sure to include the windows as exits.
- Make a floor plan of your home, including primary escape routes. (You may want your support network to assist you with it.) On the floor plan, mark the rooms where you spend a lot of time. Also, mark where your disaster supplies kit is located. Give a copy of the floor plan to your support network to help them find you and your supplies.
- Prepare an evacuation plan beforehand.

- If you have to leave your home or workplace, you may need someone's help to evacuate safely, especially down stairwells. If you need assistance during an emergency and your support network is not available, decide now who could provide alternate assistance and tell them about your condition. Give them instructions on what you need and how they can help you evacuate.

- Practice using different ways out of a building, especially if you live above the first floor. Remember, the elevator may not work or should not be used.

- If you need devices for an emergency escape, think about your physical capabilities before making a purchase. Store devices nearby, where you can get to them easily. This may mean having more than one emergency escape device available.

- Advocate for yourself. Practice how to quickly explain the best way to guide or move you and your adaptive equipment, safely and rapidly. Be ready to give brief, clear and specific instructions and directions to rescue personnel, either orally or in writing, such as:

"Please take my--

- Oxygen tank
- Wheelchair
- Gamma globulin from the freezer
- Insulin from the refrigerator
- Communication device from under the bed
- "I am blind/visually impaired. Please let me grasp your arm firmly."
- "I am deaf. Please write things down for me."
- When needed, ask for an accommodation from disaster response personnel. For example, let a responder or relief worker know if you cannot wait in lines for long periods for items like water, food and disaster relief assistance.
- Keep a small disaster supply kit in your automobile and maintain more than a half tank of fuel at all times. If



you do not drive, talk with your support network about how you will leave the area if the authorities advise an evacuation.

- Become familiar with the emergency evacuation plan for your office, school or any other location where you spend a lot of time. If the current plan does not make arrangements for people with disabilities, make sure the management at these sites knows your needs.

- Choose an alternate place to stay, such as with friends, family or at a hotel or motel outside your area if you have been told to leave your home. Find out if there are predestinated special needs shelters in your area and where they are.

- Have a care plan for your pets/service animals if you have to evacuate your home. Most shelters will not take pets, however there are limited pet friendly shelters in some areas. Find out from local emergency officials if such a shelter is available to you. Service animals are allowed in all shelters and hotels/motels. However, these places cannot care for your animal. When you leave your home, remember to take a collar, harness, identification tags, vaccination records, medications, food and water for your service animal with you.



Children not immune to disaster stress

Children can be particularly vulnerable to stress as a result of hurricanes and other disasters. Children may suffer from anxiety because of the incident itself, related losses and the upheaval of family life. Adults should appear confident and assure children the event may be noisy and damage may occur, but adults will work to make everything safe again.

Caretakers of children should be alert to signs of trouble and how to handle them. For children ages five or younger, watch for the following behaviors: crying more frequently than usual, clinging, having nightmares, showing excessive fear of the dark, fear of animals, fear of being alone, changing appetites, speaking with difficulty, or returning to outgrown behaviors such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.

Children ages five to 11 may exhibit increased irritability, aggression, and competition with their siblings for parental attention. They may also show anxiety through whining, withdrawing from their peers, and losing interest in normal activi-

ties. Those 11 to 18 may show outright rebellion, physical problems, or sleep disturbances.

The following suggestions may help to reduce stress in children:

Spend some time each day giving each child your undivided attention, even if just for a few minutes. Share experiences; reaffirm your love; make plans together; and just "be there" for each other.

Encourage them to talk. Encourage children to describe what they are feeling. Let them talk about the disaster and ask as many questions as they like. Listen to what they say. Assure them that the disaster was an act of nature and not caused by them. Include the entire family in the discussion if possible.

Understand their fears. It is important that parents accept anxieties as being very real to children. Help them cope by getting them to understand what causes their anxieties and fears. Recognize their losses, such as their pets, favorite toys and other personal items. Reassure them that everything will be all right.

Inform children. Every effort should be made to keep children informed about what is happening. Explanations should be in simple language. With children five or older, rehearse safety measures for use in case of future disasters.

Reassure them. Parents can help reassure children by telling them they are safe, holding and hugging them frequently, restoring normal routines, providing play experiences for them, and making bedtime a special moment of calm and comfort.

Encourage activities with their peers. As with adults, social time with friends is a very important part of the recovery process.

Temporarily lower expectations for them. Allow for the fact that stress from the disaster can show itself in many ways over a period of time, and make appropriate allowances.

Through your persistence, children will realize life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help for them from a mental health professional.

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