National Preparedness Month: September 2008

SPECIAL NEEDS, BASIC NEEDS
Emergency Information for People with Disabilities
By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

According to the National Organization on Disability, of the 54 million Americans with disabilities, 61% have not made plans to quickly and safely evacuate their homes, in the event of an emergency. Also, 46% of people with disabilities do not know whom to contact about emergency plans for their community. 53% percent say that they have not made plans to quickly and safely evacuate their home and 32% report that plans have not been made to evacuate them from their workplace in case of a disaster. These statistics illustrate the necessity of continuing to promote the importance of emergency preparedness for those with disabilities. According to the Center for an Accessible Society, too few disaster response officials are trained to deal effectively with people with disabilities, and too few disabled Americans have the knowledge that could help them save their own lives. The Center posts a webpage entitled *Disaster Mitigation for Persons with Disabilities,* taken from a report by The Annenberg Washington Program. It lists seven principles that should guide disaster relief efforts:

1. Accessible Disaster Facilities and Services:
Communications technology is vital for people with disabilities during a disaster to help assess damage, collect information, and deploy supplies. Access to appropriate facilities -- housing, beds, toilets, and other necessities -- must be monitored and made available to individuals with disabilities before, during, and after a disaster.

2. Accessible Communications and Assistance:
As communications technology and policy become more integral to disaster relief and mitigation, providing accessibility to the technology for people with disabilities becomes more essential.

3. Accessible and Reliable Rescue Communications:

Accessible and reliable communications technology is critical to ensuring fast, effective, and competent field treatment of people with disabilities. Current satellite and cellular technology as well as personal communication networks permit communication in areas with a damaged or destroyed communication infrastructure. Communications technologies can assist field personnel in rescue coordination and tracking and can be combined with databases that house information on optimal treatment for particular disabilities or that track the allocation of post disaster resources.

4. Partnerships with the Disability Community:

Disability organizations must join with relief and rescue organizations and the media to educate and inform their constituents of disaster contingency and self-help plans. A nationwide awareness effort should be devised and implemented to inform people with disabilities about necessary precautions for imminent disaster. In the event of a sudden natural disaster, such a program would minimize injury and facilitate rescue efforts

5. Disaster Preparation, Education, and Training:

Communications technologies are crucial for educating the public about disaster preparedness and warning the people most likely to be affected. Relief and rescue operations must have the appropriate medical equipment, supplies, and training to address the immediate needs of people with disabilities.

6. Partnerships with the Media:

Many natural disasters can be predicted in advance. Disaster preparedness for people with disabilities is critical in minimizing the impact of a disaster. The media -- in partnership with disability and governmental organizations -- should incorporate advisories into emergency broadcasts in formats accessible to people with disabilities. Such advisories alert the public, provide a mechanism for informing rescue personnel of individual medical conditions and impairments, and identify accessible emergency shelters. The creation and repetition of accessible media messages is critical for empowering people with disabilities to protect themselves from disasters.

7. Universal Design and Implementation Strategies:

A universal design approach to meeting the needs of people with disabilities before and after a disaster will benefit many people without disabilities, such as the very young or the aged. A look at existing agreements among relief organizations and local, state, federal, and international governments will offer guidance in developing effective strategies for universal design and implementation plans.

Suggestions for Emergency Responders

According to an article in EMS Responder.com, Emergency responders should follow certain 'rules of thumb' when working with people with disabilities. It is noted that these "rules" cannot apply in every situation but they make a good foundation to begin with.

- Always ask the person the best way to assist them. The answer will usually give you a significant understanding of any disabilities you may be facing.
- Don't assume what a person's abilities are based on outward signs. For instance, just because a person has a white cane doesn't mean that they are completely blind. In fact, "blind" people range from having a severe vision loss to having perfect vision but within a very small field (sometimes called tunnel vision).
- When you're talking to people with disabilities, be sure to do just that: talk to the person. Oftentimes, people end up talking to the disability or any outward sign of it. In other words, they talk to a hearing aid, or they'll talk to a wheelchair and it comes across as condescending. Rather, focus squarely on the person and their responses.
- Be calm, cool and collected. It is OK to admit that you have not been exposed to a certain disability and it is equally OK to ask questions but project an air of confidence and competence.

Suggestions for Individuals Who Have a Disability

The American Red Cross produces a booklet called *Disaster Preparedness for People With Disabilities,* designed to help people who have physical, visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities prepare for natural disasters and their consequences. Recommendations include:

1. Know what kinds of disasters could happen in your area and consider what your environment might look like after one occurs. Certain resources or utilities may not be available and conditions could hamper your independence.

2. Complete a personal assessment. Decide what you will be able to do for yourself and what assistance you may need before, during and after a disaster (based on the disrupted environment, your capabilities and your limitations).

3. Create a personal support network of family, friends, relatives, neighbors, roommates and co-workers who could assist you at a moment's notice. Discuss your special needs with them, including evacuation plans and medical information lists.

4. Make an emergency information list so others will know whom to call if they find you unconscious, unable to speak or if they need to help you evacuate quickly. Include the names and numbers of out-of-town contacts, as well as everyone in your network.

5. Compile a medical information list that contains the names and numbers of your doctors, your medications, dosage instructions, and any existing conditions. Make note of your adaptive equipment, allergies, and any communication difficulties you may have.

6. Keep at least a seven-day supply of medications on hand. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what you should do if you cannot immediately get more. If you

undergo treatments administered by a clinic or hospital, ask your provider how to prepare for a disruption caused by a disaster.

7. Identify evacuation routes and safe places to go during a disaster.

8. Complete a checklist to make sure that your personal disaster plan is comprehensive. Be sure to include your medical needs, evacuation routes, care plans for your service animals, an alternative place to stay, etc.

9. Keep a disaster supply kit in your home, car, workplace or anywhere you may spend your time. Include such items as food, water, a first aid kit, adaptive equipment, batteries, and supplies for your pets or service animals.

10. Make your home or office safer by checking hallways, stairwells, doorways, windows and other areas for hazards that may keep you from safely leaving a building during an emergency. Secure or remove furniture and objects that may block your path.

Resources – Preparedness for People With Disabilities:

The Disability Preparedness Resource Center
http://www.disabilitypreparedness.gov/

The Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities posts a website that provides practical information on how people with and without disabilities can prepare for an emergency. It also provides information for people with disabilities, their families, and service providers. In addition, this site includes information for emergency planners and first responders to help them to better prepare for serving persons with disabilities.

No Person Left Behind
http://www.nopersonleftbehind.org/

This is the website of a successful emergency preparedness program that is being emulated throughout the country. No Person Left Behind is built upon four principles: 100% accountability of all persons with disabilities; the identification of basic needs for persons with disabilities; the education of persons with disabilities and families on disaster preparedness; and the empowering of persons with disabilities to take control of their disaster planning. This free online resource offers valuable information on a very practical disaster readiness program, and how to participate in it.

About The Authors

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Article inquiries welcome. On request, we can provide feature-length articles tailored to your audience and requirements. **Please contact John Cavanagh at Bridge Multimedia: (212) 213-3740 or jcavanagh@bridgemultimedia.com**.