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## National Preparedness Month – September 2008

### **DON'T BE DISABLED BY AN EMERGENCY: BE PREPARED**

By Barbara Ceconi and Kurt Kuss, Guest Contributors

This week, Emergency Information Online is proud to present a special feature article guest written by Ms. Barbara Ceconi and Mr. Kurt Kuss. It was originally printed in Disability Issues: Vol. 27, No. 2.

When an emergency strikes, it is often sudden and frightening. Disasters can range from a blizzard to pandemic flu to a terrorist attack. We are all painfully aware of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina - the images and stories are

fixed in our consciousness. Although official reactions to emergencies vary, all responses involve taking care of people. The hope is that responders have learned from the mistakes of Katrina. However, insuring public safety needs a multi-layered approach including initiating a personal preparedness strategy. While we have no control over a potential disaster, we do have influence to insure that we are prepared in the event of an emergency – whatever it might be.

Advanced planning by individuals will improve the security, safety and health of people who have some type of disability or complicated medical issue. While you need to believe that emergency responders can appropriately react in community-wide crises, recognize that no one is as familiar with your and your family's particular needs as you are. Everyone ought to have a personal emergency plan, but it is critical for anyone with a disability to be personally prepared to shelter at home during an epidemic. It is also important to organize a "To Go" kit when it becomes necessary to evacuate your home.

Being able to gather everything you need during a crisis is almost impossible, particularly when you need to act RIGHT NOW! Systematically preparing in advance can insure your safety and, in fact, save your life. The most effective method you can employ to survive any emergency is to organize your plan yourself, or work with your support network to develop a strategy.

Access Umbrella, Inc. has been working on issues of emergency preparedness with the State of Massachusetts, Region 4b. This region includes the twenty-seven communities surrounding Boston. While our work translates into a

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universal design approach to effective, efficient, and safe emergency treatment for the general population, our focus has been on serving “vulnerable populations.” The groups included in this definition are people who do not speak English as their primary language, people who are elderly, and people who have disabilities.

Regardless of whether you fall into any of these groups, home preparedness is essential. For people with disabilities, more planning is important due to the complexity of needs. It can be daunting to consider all that is involved with organizing and gathering what you might require in the event of an emergency. It can be more difficult if you live alone or have limited resources, but it is not impossible.

When people feel overwhelmed they sometimes choose to do nothing. If you or a loved one has a disability, it is imperative to utilize the following recommendations. Most of what you need is fairly inexpensive. The one exception is an extra supply of medications. We will offer some suggestions about this later. Remember, you don't have to do or purchase everything all at once. Break down the suggestions into easy-to-accomplish segments. The thing that will help you feel better prepared is to initiate and follow-through.

The pamphlet entitled, ***Be Prepared, Plan Ahead*** was developed by Garrett Simonsen and Lynn Shoeff at the Cambridge Advanced Practice Center for Emergency Preparedness. It very plainly outlines how to take control of your own emergency plans. It states, “Planning ahead for an emergency will give you peace of mind and can help keep your family and friends safe. Here are some simple steps you can take to prepare.

- **Family Communication Plan.** Know how your family will contact each other and where you will meet.
- **Food & Water.** Have a 3-day food and water supply for each person in your home. Remember individual dietary needs and plan for your pets.
- **First Aid & Tools.** Have a first aid kit with health products and prescription medicine.
- **Evacuation Kit.** Have supplies ready in your car or in a backpack in case you must leave home. Pack lightly and include basic supplies for 24 to 48 hours.

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- **Review.** Every 6 months, review your plans and supplies with everyone in your home. Replace expired food, water and medicine. Update your communication plan.

Keeping an up-to-date medication list costs no money, just time. This will assist emergency responders whether you are sheltering at home or need to evacuate. Add to the list the assistive devices that you use, e.g. type of hearing aids and batteries, connections for an electric wheelchair, speech board or voice synthesizer, white canes, supplies for service animals, types of mobility devices such as canes/crutches/walkers, or types of special equipment you might need to take medications or for specific medical conditions. Realize that you might forget some specifics, or that equipment can get lost or forgotten during a crisis.

You should have a list of any important contact information. Family or friend's addresses and phone numbers who may need to be contacted after a disaster. Compile a list of contact information for your physicians and other healthcare provider's in case someone needs prescription information or specific medical history. These will be handy resources in case you need to evacuate. Also, by including these people in your emergency communication plan; you will begin to develop a network of support in case you need more help during an emergency.

For people with disabilities, it is vital to self-advocate both prior to and during an actual emergency. If you feel unable to advocate for yourself, speak with your family, or members of your support system to insure that your particular needs will be met. Talk to them about your concerns, and what services are available in your community during a disaster.

Does your town have contingency plans designed for people with disabilities? For example, if you have a sensory impairment, how will you get the pertinent information? Many communities have a system for dealing with this.

Ask your service providers what their preparedness plans are and how services you depend on might be affected. Are local shelters accessible to you? If not, what other options do you have if you need to evacuate your home? We would like to assume that all shelters can accommodate citizens with disabilities, but some emergencies may render the usual shelters unavailable for use.

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You can obtain some of this information from your local Public Health Department or Board of Health. Most communities have an employee in this office whose responsibility is emergency preparedness. Be patient since many employees may not work full-time. This is another reason to prepare in advance.

Obtain documentation for your service animal from the training center where you acquired the animal. Keep an extra supply of food for the animal in your "To Go" kit and in your home in case of an extended stay.

Contact your healthcare insurance provider to discuss what your options are for obtaining extra medications before an emergency happens. Many providers such as MassHealth and some HMOs only give you a thirty-day supply of your prescriptions at a time. If you begin to refill your prescriptions a couple of days earlier every month, you can begin to gather a few extra day's supply. Presently, planning meetings are occurring on the Massachusetts State level to allow prescription refills of three months during a declared state of emergency. This would require a change in legislation. Make this issue known to your federal and state officials. It is not only a problem for people with disabilities, but for the general public.

A good initial expense is an emergency preparedness kit. Currently, there are a couple of pretty good ones available at Target stores and on-line. The Red Cross kit contains supplies for 4 people. Gloves, ponchos, blanket, flashlight, snap lights, radio and batteries, adhesive and roll bandages, ointments, antiseptic wipes, gauze pads, etc. It is a nicely thought out package and is relatively affordable. The cost is \$30, with \$10 donated to the Red Cross until the end of August. Follow this link for details:

[http://www.target.com/gp/detail.html/sr=1-1/qid=1179836841/ref=sr\\_1\\_1/601-1652509-2537719?ie=UTF8&asin=B000A3QLBY](http://www.target.com/gp/detail.html/sr=1-1/qid=1179836841/ref=sr_1_1/601-1652509-2537719?ie=UTF8&asin=B000A3QLBY)

As was mentioned earlier, *you* can be your best advocate. Begin by compiling your important information and documentation. Discuss emergency plans with your support systems; family, friends, and medical professionals. Ascertain what your town's emergency plans are and request information about any specific planning for people who have disabilities.

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A large disaster affects the community as a whole. It does not only strike a person who has a disability, but creates specific areas of concern that may not affect the rest of the population. The numbers of people who fall into the category of “vulnerable populations” are the majority of many communities. It is incumbent upon us to take as much responsibility as we can for ourselves and those we love.

## Resource for People with Disabilities:

### **Access Umbrella**

<http://www.accessumbrella.com/>

Access Umbrella works with corporate, cultural and educational institutions on issues of disability awareness, application of universal design principles, ADA compliance, policy development, and train-the-trainer sessions involving learning style theory. Members of the team combine personal experience with professional expertise to approach the design of programs, services, products, curriculum, and public spaces from a disabled consumer's perspective. Their use of universal design benefits all people whether or not they have a disability.

### **About The Authors**

***Barbara Ceconi and Kurt Kuss** are partners in the consulting firm of Access Umbrella, Inc. Together, they have been working on issues of Emergency Preparedness from a universal design perspective with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Region 4b, which includes the twenty-seven communities surrounding Boston.*

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