

Vulnerable Populations & Disaster

TIP SHEET
26

Your whole community benefits when people with particular vulnerabilities are supported. Accommodating their needs, especially during disasters, allows families to stay together, preserves natural support systems, prevents or mitigates acute medical conditions, and permits you as a leader to focus your community's limited resources on the people who need these resources most.

TYPES OF VULNERABILITIES (ALSO CALLED "SPECIAL NEEDS")

HEARING

Over 30 million people across the country are hearing-impaired (deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf/blind). Some do not speak; some use American Sign Language or another sign language; some of them wear hearing aids; some do not.

Particular needs during an evacuation or disaster:

- May not have access to hearing aids or proper batteries
- May not be able to receive information audibly from the television or radio
- May not be able to engage in two-way communication in person or over the telephone without an interpreter or assistive communication device

Responses:

- Relay all information visually, before, during, and after a disaster (sign language or posted text).
- Go out of your way to alert the hearing-impaired of a coming disaster, perhaps including personal visits or asking someone to help interpret important messages.

MOBILITY

Over 14 million Americans are mobility-impaired. Some use a wheelchair; others use a cane, crutches, or a walker.

Particular needs during an evacuation or disaster:

- May struggle to leave a damaged building or a dangerous geographic area; in power outages may not be able to use stairs or find adequate exits
- May not be able to get to necessary services because of debris or blocked access
- May or may not be able to dress themselves or cook and clean for themselves and may require assistance doing everyday tasks

Responses:

- Physically help people navigate a particularly damaged building or area of a city.
- Ensure that all facilities provided are accessible to all people regardless of mobility vulnerabilities.

SPEECH

Approximately two million Americans have a speech impairment that interferes with inter-personal communication. Some who do speak are hard to understand. Others do not speak at all; use communication boards; or use Speech-to-Speech relay services.

VISION

Over 10 million people in America are vision-impaired (blind, low-vision, deaf/blind). Some use service animals; some use white canes; some read Braille; some with low vision can read a document with a large bold typeface.

Particular needs during an evacuation or disaster:

- Cannot see a map or a television that shows evacuation routes of a building or city, away from a fire, flood, or violence.
- May have reduced mobility in dangerous areas
- May need help with a service animal (food, water, space)

Responses

- Communicate alerts and warnings as audible or tactile information in multiple formats.
- Provide extra help navigating areas rendered dangerous due to a disaster.
- Provide care for service animals (food, water, space, etc.).
- Connect them with their usual resources when possible.

COGNITIVE, INTELLECTUAL, & MENTAL HEALTH

Over 16 million Americans have a cognitive, intellectual or mental health vulnerability (over 7% of the population).

Particular needs during an evacuation or disaster:

- Need early and timely, accurate, and accessible information in plain language.
- May be separated from their family and/or the people that usually care for them.
- May be especially stressed and confused

Responses:

- Be prepared to offer extra guidance and care in a compassionate and respectful manner.
- Connect them with their usual resources when possible.

Particular needs during an evacuation or disaster:

- May be without the equipment or speech relay services that they normally use.
- May be hampered in expressing their needs and questions

Responses

- Take extra care to understand what they need.

TYPES OF VULNERABILITIES CONTINUED

HEALTH MAINTENANCE VULNERABILITIES

Nearly half of all Americans say they are currently taking prescription medications. One in three Americans (34%) take prescription drugs to treat a long-term illness or condition. Among children younger than 12, 5.7% were on bronchodilators for asthma. For those 20 to 59, antidepressants were the most commonly prescribed drug, with 10.8% of this population taking them. During a disaster, these drugs along with other necessary medications may have been left behind, or have become unavailable through the normal procedures. As a religious leader you can be a source of information as to where people in your community can access their necessary medications and medical procedures. Contact your local OEM to learn what services can be provided and through what organizations.

PREPAREDNESS

Here are some ways to prepare yourself to serve vulnerable populations in your community during a disaster

- Ensuring you know beforehand who in your community is vulnerable will help you when a disaster strikes.
- Work with members of your congregation and the local OEM to identify people with special needs in your community.
- Encourage vulnerable members of your community to have a plan for disaster situations, including evacuation routes of buildings and a disaster kit which provides basic needs, such as food, water, medicine, and clothing for a few days.
- Recommend that all vulnerable members of your community speak with the local OEM for tips on disaster procedures.
- Develop a community disaster plan which includes accommodating the particular needs of vulnerable people.
- Speak with the local OEM to ensure that you are doing everything possible to help vulnerable individuals.
- Consider using a special needs registry or phone tree to effectively communicate during disasters.

RESPONSE

- Check on vulnerable people first after a disaster.
 - Sometimes, all that is needed is a phone call. However, depending on the disaster and their specific vulnerability, phone communication may be impossible or impractical. In these cases home visits may be necessary.
 - Remember that people with vulnerabilities may not have access to information in typical media outlets such as radio and television. Never assume that they have seen or heard warnings of coming disasters.
- You may have to help them evacuate a building or an area of town. Door-to-door pick-ups may be necessary. Make sure you bring the appropriate personnel with you to transport them.
- When speaking with or transporting people with vulnerabilities, always treat them with respect and dignity.
- When offering public service after a disaster, always attempt to be as accommodating as possible to vulnerable individuals.

The following tips are good to keep in mind:

- All service locations must be accessible with parking nearby and near accessible transit.
- Avoid using outdoor areas that are muddy, sandy, or covered by thick grass.
- Some vulnerable people may require assistance to travel to and from points of emergency and recovery services or to transport food and water to their residences.
- Permit people with mobility impairments the option of going to the head of long lines.
- Train staff to realize that some people have the physical ability to ride buses, but do not have the cognitive ability to learn new routes established because of a disaster.
- Train staff to realize that some people with emotional or developmental vulnerabilities may be too unsettled by the disaster to return to their safe residences unless accompanied by a counselor familiar with their particular needs.
- Some people with special needs may require assistance understanding and filling out emergency paperwork.
- Train staff to know that even normal amounts of background noise may prevent a person with impaired hearing from understanding spoken instructions.
- Train staff in the essentials of sign language.
- Forms and explanations for FEMA and other assistance should be available in Braille, large print, and on audio tape.
- Stock bicycle tire-patch kits for use on wheelchair and scooters with flat tires.
- Realize that a Food Stamp application question such as "Do you buy and prepare your own food?" yields a misleading answer when asked of individuals who use home attendants.

The Information in this tip sheet was adapted and sometimes taken directly from the sources below.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control—<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/vulnerabilityandhealth/emergencypreparedness.html>
- Disabled Persons & Disaster Planning: DP2— <http://www.citycent.com/dp2/service.htm>
- FEMA— http://www.fema.gov/pdf/about/oddc/all_hands_0411.pdf
- National Organization on Disabilities— <http://nod.org/assets/downloads/Guide-Emergency-Planners.html>