

Best Practices to Level the Playing Field for People with Disabilities in Disasters



Catherine "Cat" Rooney Howland, MA

Research and Training Center on Independent Living, University of Kansas



Research and Risk Factors

- Katrina taught us many things, among them that there are major gaps in preparedness planning and pre- and post-communication and information sharing.
- Other researchers have found people with disabilities are at a higher risk of injury and death in a disaster in comparison to the general public.
- Risk factors for people with disabilities include not being personally prepared and individual and community mindsets such as "it can never happen here."



Risk Factors Placing People with Disabilities at Higher Risk of Death Because of Disasters

- The disability itself
- No or inadequate preparedness plan
- "Survival of the Fittest" response procedures which are aimed at getting the strongest people out of harm's way first.
- Systems designed to assist in and after disasters often fail (aid, evacuation, shelters).
- Social-economic factors (employment, income, transportation, social or residential isolation)
- Health
- Mindsets (thinking/attitudes) of individuals and institutions
- Independence jeopardized (separation from assistive devices, meds and medical equipment, routine health care, service animal or helper, and an accommodating environment)

These risk factors are obstacles for communities and people with disabilities to being prepared.

Many of the contributing factors for risk can be significantly reduced or eliminated by leveling the playing field for people with disabilities. What the current body of knowledge in this field suggests is for public health personnel, emergency managers, agencies serving people with disabilities and people with disabilities to:

1. Become better informed (education/training) about the needs of different vulnerable populations
2. Change mindsets/attitudes
3. Become better prepared and assist others to be prepared
4. Revise and/or create preparedness plans at work, residence, community, with clients
5. Remove risks (identified barriers and obstacles)
6. Include input from people with disabilities
7. Work together as a team to do the above!

For more information please contact:
catr@ku.edu www.rtcil.org

Leveling the Playing Field with Community Practices

There are exemplary best practice efforts addressing disaster-related needs of people with disabilities. These new ideas, or fresh approaches using proven methods, can be replicated at the state, county or grassroots level. They are often accomplished by forming collaborations among different local groups, on a shoe-string budget or with small grants. There are also approaches waiting to be discovered and put into action.

Our work has been directly involved with a community-based coalition, called Together Prepared, to assist the local health department and county emergency management agency to reach out to agencies serving vulnerable populations to get them and their clients active in preparedness.

Mission of Together Prepared: To ensure that local capabilities exist for enhancing personal readiness through training and education to minimize the impact of disasters on vulnerable populations.

- This coalition was initiated by the health department and EM agency, with our center and 18 community-based organizations (CBOs) serving vulnerable populations.
- First survey found that 58% of 33 local CBOs had a plan to continue serving clients during a disaster but never or almost never practiced the plan. A majority said they would not be able to provide information to consumers about what to do in an emergency.

Best Practice Activities

- Hold quarterly community educational forums
- Annual preparedness fair
- Website www.togetherprepared.org

Results

- Long-term commitment of members
- A majority of members have updated plans or created plans and extended preparedness to clients
- Developed database of community-based organizations
- Received grant funding to develop hotline administered by local library during disasters
- Responded quickly and appropriately to get vulnerable populations vaccinated for H1N1



Leveling the Playing Field with Education

We also develop free internet courses on disasters and people with disabilities to level the playing fields and have gotten best practice recognition for our efforts.

Courses

- **Planning for Disaster-Related Risks and Functional Needs for People with Disabilities: Train-The-Trainer** (course #1026720) 70-minute intro identifies risk factors and how to prepare accordingly.
- **Planning for Disaster-Related Risks and Functional Needs for People with Disabilities** (course #1026403). Same course as above for non-trainers.
- **Ready, Willing & Able (#1020884)**. 2 hour intro course on disability etiquette, communication methods, terminology, and evacuation tips to assist people with physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities.
- **Animal Emergency Preparedness (course #1025307)**. Hour course on how to prepare for service animals and pets in the event of a disaster, and what to expect after a disaster.
- **The Prepared Lifestyle Part 1: Public Health Threats, Pandemics and Associated Risks for People with Disabilities**. Hour intermediate course on public health threats, characteristics of pandemics and risk factors of public health threats to people with disabilities.
- **The Prepared Lifestyle Part 2: Seasonal and Pandemic Planning**. Hour course on steps for prevention and preparedness for seasonal and pandemic flu, with all-hazards checklists.

These courses are free, administered on TRAIN www.train.org as continuing education courses for health care and emergency management personnel, staff of agencies serving vulnerable populations and people with disabilities. Statistical analysis and course evaluations have shown that the courses:

1. Increase knowledge
2. Increase confidence
3. Keep the interest level of diverse groups of participants and are well-received

The seasonal and pandemic course, held with an instructor in the community, led to a majority of the students desiring to make a commitment to make changes toward being better prepared.

