

ILRU Network

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Prepare for the Worst: How CILs Can Assist *INDIVIDUALS* in Disaster Preparation

As hurricane season again approaches, disaster preparation is very much on our minds—especially those of us who live and work near the coastal regions of our country. Disasters can take many forms—earthquakes, floods, fires, tornadoes, snowstorms, even terrorist attacks, so preparation is important no matter where we live. As time passed after the terrorist attacks of 2001, we slipped into complacency. Until hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck with such great force, few of us had devoted nearly enough attention to disaster preparation. National leaders are now beginning to speak of creating a “culture of preparedness.” We in the IL field can ensure through our advocacy efforts that the words of officials do become more than just rhetoric. We can also play important roles in creating a culture of preparedness within the disability community—individual, organizational, and community preparation.

Since the hurricanes struck, we at ILRU have assisted over 3,000 people with disabilities affected by the storms. As we’ve provided help, we’ve also learned much about what to do and what not to do in preparing for disaster. We’ve also spoken and worked with directors and staff of affected centers. They’ve given us much good information on what worked and didn’t work for them.

Based on what we’ve learned from those who have experienced disaster, along with good information we’ve gathered from a variety of sources, we have created three newsletters to help all of us prepare for the worst. This first newsletter focuses on how centers can assist individuals. Soon we’ll publish two more newsletters: one will address organizational preparation for centers; the other will describe advocacy efforts of centers to ensure governments at all levels, as well as service organizations, meet their obligation to people with disabilities in times of disaster.

The good news is that many preparation steps are simple and they can make a big difference in how individuals and organizations survive major disruption. In these pages we trust you’ll find many good ideas that will help you help those in our community.

--Richard Petty, IL NET Director

Nine Points of Preparation

This newsletter is written for any individual with a disability who may face a disaster. That could well be any of us. As we’ve spoken with thousands of people with disabilities, worked with CILs, and experienced a harrowing evacuation ourselves, we’ve come to believe that we must adopt a mindset of preparation. Others are urging a culture of preparation. Whatever name we give to it, we need to be better prepared. We’ve also learned that we as people with disabilities must plan even more aggressively. Few people fare well in a disaster; we fared more poorly than most in the recent disasters. From this perspective, we’ve developed the following key points about preparation and evacuation:

- Set up a personal emergency fund to cover at least the first few days of your evacuation. Even if you have limited income, try to find a way to put even a few dollars aside each month. Ask friends, family, a church, or charitable organization to assist. Set the money aside somewhere—maybe in a savings account—where you can get to it quickly. By keeping it separate from your other money, you’ll be less tempted to spend it, so it can be available when you truly need it. Get an automated teller machine bank card so you can do banking from other places if you evacuate. Use direct deposit for benefit checks and paychecks whenever you can. You may not be able to get to your local bank yourself.

- Prepare the best portable emergency kit you can. Many recommendations from FEMA and other organizations appear to assume most people have their own transportation and can haul lots of stuff in their vehicle. Many of us with disabilities don't have that luxury, so our portable emergency kits can't be nearly so extensive. Select the things you'll need most. Try to put the kits in one or two small travel bags so you can grab them quickly. Include some water. Many people who survived the hurricanes reported extreme dehydration because they had no water. If you have a service animal, don't forget their needs. Lists of emergency kit supplies are included in this newsletter.

- Prepare an emergency kit for your home in case you have no warning of the disaster and must stay. This kit can be more extensive than your portable kit. Be sure to include water and food for you, your family, service animals, and pets.

- Plan for where you can go to get away from the disaster. Ask a relative or friend in another town ahead of time if you can plan to go there to stay at least for a few days.

- Plan for how you'll evacuate. You might ask a friend or relative if you can leave with them. Make sure you get a clear, firm commitment from someone you can trust. Even create a backup arrangement in case your first option falls through. You could also consider buying a bus or train ticket ahead of time.

- If you have warning of an impending disaster, get away and get away as early as you possibly can. This is especially true if you require accessible transportation (paratransit systems are quickly overloaded), or if you would have problems tolerating heat or long waits in traffic. In Katrina, most who tried to leave after the evacuation order were unable to. In the Rita evacuation from Houston, many people who left during the two days before the storm were stranded on freeways for hours.

- If you can handle your own evacuation, remember many of your brothers and sisters with disabilities cannot. Offer whatever assistance you can.

- If you don't think you'll be able to evacuate, find out ahead of time where you can go for shelter. Do try to evacuate; staying in a shelter should be a last alternative. The Red Cross and other service organizations continue to operate with an ill defined "special needs" approach to sheltering. Be specific

about what needs you have and press for details about what shelters can and will meet them. Be aware that if you need personal assistance and are without your own PCA, you may be at risk of nursing home placement. Also, if you're a ventilator user and know you'll need emergency power, explain this carefully and make sure planners truly understand your needs. It's also risky because local shelters may be poor alternatives; if you live in a coastal community and a level five hurricane strikes, local shelters, if available at all, are likely to be far less safe than evacuating.

- Plan for your safety when evacuating or in a shelter, and when you return after a disaster. Try to protect yourself from assault or robbery. Always be with others you know and trust. Be alert. Try to avoid people and situations that could put you in harms way. Don't go places alone and especially don't return to your home if you can't be certain the area is secure.

- Advocate for better community planning. Work with others with disabilities to ensure that the needs of the disability community are met. Your life and the lives of others will depend on it.

Preparing to Evacuate--A Way Out

Whether you experience high wind, high waters, low temperatures, or any other natural disaster, your preparation steps can make a difference in how you survive and recover. You may or may not have much warning that a disaster is imminent so the time to prepare is now.

Plan escape routes from your home, work, and other places you go often. For example, always check for emergency exits. Consider how you'll get to exits if there is no power and you're in the dark.

If it helps you, make a diagram of the layout of your house or workplace and plan more than one escape route in the event of a sudden disaster. Place copies of the diagram in key places. Place them at the proper level for wheelchair users, smaller family members, and children. Make the diagram accessible, if needed, whether in large letters or as a tactile diagram. Consider how you'll handle different kinds of disasters—rising water, wind, fire, earthquake, etc. Practice your escape every month or so.

For some emergencies and/or evacuations, you might be instructed to turn off your utilities before you leave

home. Find out how to turn off the water, gas, and electricity to your house before you're in the middle of a disaster. And remember; do not turn the gas back on yourself. Someone from your local utility company must do that. Plan where to meet outside—perhaps a neighbor's house or neighborhood business.

A Point of Contact Away from Your City

You will want to have a place to call where you can check to make sure that people are all right – and to assure others that you're all right. Establish a point of contact outside your city. If your area experiences a natural disaster, you, your family, even friends, can plan ahead of time to check in with a friend or relative. If you are separated from family or friends, a distant contact like this may be the only way you'll be able to know where others are and if they're safe. Work groups, such as a CIL, can also do this. Make up small cards for family, friends, or coworkers. Have the friend's or relative's number and other emergency contact info on it for each family member (or friend or coworker). That way, you can call the contact to see if they have heard from other family members if you've lost touch in an evacuation.

Important Papers

Keep important papers in a safe location. That is pretty simple. The harder part may be deciding what to include in the category of "important papers." During the hurricanes of 2005, particularly Katrina, one of the biggest obstacles to getting services for evacuees was the lack of documentation. FEMA wanted some form of identification, which some people did not have. To be eligible for some forms of assistance, a copy of a lease was required. Most people who thought to take important papers when evacuating did not include their lease agreements. Even insurance policies were often left behind. All insurance policies should be kept with the rest of your important papers.

Birth certificates, marriage certificates, divorce papers, custody papers, guardianship papers, wills, powers of attorney, passports, deeds, immunization records, property records, and social security cards should also be included. Be sure to have the names and phone numbers of all treating physicians, your bank, your therapists, and your pharmacy. If you keep important records, especially financial information, on your computer, back up that information onto disks that you can take with you.

Make a record of your residence and personal property for insurance purposes. One easy way is to take photographs of your home – both outside and inside. Be sure to include your personal belongings, especially those that have value. And don't forget your medical equipment. There is a free Household and Personal Property Inventory that you can download from the University of Illinois at www.ag.uiuc.edu/~vista/abstracts/ahouseinv.html.

Emergency and First Aid Kits

Your own first aid kit should include the usual items in a first aid kit plus any prescription medications you take. Below are checklists from FEMA you can use to make sure that your emergency kits have everything you will need. FEMA recommends having separate kits at home, at work, and even in your car. Of course, if you don't have a car and you use public transportation, put together a smaller kit with things most essential for you.

Early Training

Before you are in the midst of a disaster, consider taking a Red Cross first aid course, CPR training, and learning how to properly operate a fire extinguisher.

To Leave or Not To Leave

You may, at some point before or during a disaster, make a decision about whether to leave. Your decision will likely be based on whether there is time to leave, road conditions, and what emergency management officials are advising.

If you have a disability, there are additional considerations. If you are hearing impaired, you might need to make special arrangements to receive the audible warnings that others will hear. If you have a mobility impairment, you may need to make special arrangements for transportation and check on the accessibility of a shelter in advance. If you have life-sustaining medical equipment, you will need to make arrangements for that to be evacuated with you. If you have special dietary needs, you need to be sure that you have an adequate emergency food supply.

If evacuation is even mentioned as a possibility, start gathering what you will need to take with you and don't forget extra wheelchair batteries, oxygen, catheters, medication, and food for service animals.

Registration

Your community's emergency management office may offer the opportunity for individuals with

disabilities to register in a database if they will need special assistance during a disaster because of their disability. If you think you might want to register, be sure to ask what services are promised to people who register and what the consequence is of not registering.

Service Animals

First, remember you have a right for your service animal to accompany you wherever you go. There are persistent rumors of people who were forced to leave service animals behind in the Katrina evacuation.

Make sure your service animal is wearing identification, ideally identification that shows the animal is a service animal. There is no legal requirement for this, but it might help in the chaos of an evacuation. This could make a difference in how the animal is treated if you should become separated.

If you evacuate, be sure to take your service animal's medications and medical records, along with a sturdy harness. Take enough pet food and water to last three days. Taking some of your service animal's familiar items may help reduce stress for your animal. Take a description and a photo of your service animal with you in case you become separated.

Pets

Plan in advance for what you will do with your pets (not service animals) by keeping extra pet supplies, keeping up-to-date veterinary records, making sure your pet is wearing identification, and getting a pet carrier. Contact animal shelters in your area in advance to find out about services they may offer during an evacuation. If you have an idea about where you will go if your area is evacuated, call ahead to find out which hotels will accept pets and/or where local animal boarding facilities are located in the place where you plan to go.

Pets are generally not permitted in shelters. Service animals must be permitted in shelters.

After the Disaster

If you take refuge in a neighborhood shelter, or if you shelter in your home, you still need to plan ahead. Following a natural disaster, you may not be able to get any help for several days. You need to have your own food and fresh water and other supplies to last for at least three days. It is likely that you will be without one or more basic services like electricity, gas, water, or telephones for days or weeks.

ilruNetWork

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