

Bringing People with Disabilities to the Emergency Planning Table

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Emergency preparedness is an essential part of public health. In a disaster, emergency preparedness becomes emergency response – evacuating individuals from flooded areas, distributing food and water to towns wrecked by a tornado, controlling the spread of a disease, or decontaminating areas after an attack. Effective emergency response cannot happen without good planning. Emergency preparedness starts long before the disaster, and often begins in a conference room with experts gathered around a table. You have state and local public health workers, emergency responders, preparedness experts, epidemiologists, and law enforcement all together in a room, each bringing something different to the table. However, there is an important facet of the population’s needs not represented here – people with disabilities.

So, why should people with disabilities be included in the emergency planning process?

1. It will make your planning team more representative of the population as a whole.

People with disabilities represent the nation’s largest minority group. In the US, roughly 1 in 5 people has a disability. In Michigan, it’s over 1 in 4. We are not talking about a small group of people. If you are planning for emergencies that the general population will experience, then you should have the general population represented in the planning.

2. It will help you better understand what situations you may encounter in an emergency.

In an emergency, you will be interacting with, assisting, and responding to requests from and about people with disabilities. The people best able to prepare you for these are the people who will experience them. Things like:

- Where can people with power-dependent medical equipment go during an outage?
- How can a person with a service animal be decontaminated without extended separation from that service animal?
- How can we convey information to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing during a local press conference?
- Where can someone go to get their medications during a disaster?

These are all very realistic situations – and only the tip of the ice berg. None have a simple answer. By including people with disabilities in your planning, you can plan ahead for situations like these now and how best to address them as they come up. You will save yourself time and stress when the situation actually happens.

3. It will help you expand your network.

Do you know who to call if a person with a hearing impairment requests an ASL interpreter for a meeting? Do you know which organizations serve people with disabilities in a given county? Chances are good that you may not. People with disabilities bring not only knowledge but also a

network to the table with them. If a person has used an interpreter in the past, they may be able to recommend an agency for you to contact.

4. You can better educate emergency responders on emergency response for people with disabilities.

Again, 1 in 5 people in the US have a disability. In any kind of disaster, emergency responders will be assisting people with disabilities. It's important that they have a basic understanding of what things like a hypoglycemic episode would look like and how to respond, or how individuals who are nonverbal can communicate their needs. It's also important that they understand basic disability etiquette – things like keeping individuals with their service animals if at all possible, and using person-first language.

5. It will help you meet legal requirements.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures that people with disabilities have access to all public and state government programs, resources, and facilities. If you have an emergency shelter set up that isn't accessible, you could easily be faced with a lawsuit. If something isn't accessible, chances are you just weren't aware of the problem. There often isn't malicious intent behind ADA violations. If you have people with disabilities participating in the planning, you are more likely to catch these issues up front and have time (and the assistance of people with disabilities) to address them.

6. It's the right thing to do.

If you work in public health (or any kind of healthcare, emergency response, or advocacy organization), you serve the people. Your job is to help people – all people - achieve health and wellness. People with disabilities are not only part of this population you serve, but also a significant portion of it. Making sure that the needs of all people are met in your work is the right thing to do. It's who we are and why we are in the jobs we are.

So next time you're in a conference room working on emergency planning look around and make sure you have the best possible team assembled. Give people with disabilities the chance to help you make your plan the best it can be.