

Evacuation Considerations for the Elderly, Disabled and Special Medical Care Issues:

During emergencies, evacuations become a reality. It is stressful for both local officials issuing an evacuation order as well as the citizens. Think how much more stressful an evacuation is for an elderly person, disabled person or a person who has special medical needs after a hospital stay.

However, if you do your planning ahead of time, much of this stress can be eliminated. Use the local media to help citizens prepare for disasters. During the Flood of 1993, St. Louis Police Sgt. Vince Stahlin conducted a city-wide survey to identify elderly and disabled residents, their medications and how to contact their relatives. Additionally, he did extensive public awareness campaigns educating citizens about shelter locations and what items citizens need to bring to the shelter.

Tips for Disabled Citizens:

Deborah K. Dee, Ph.D., Commissioner for the St. Louis Office on Disabled, Department of Human Services, made the following observations for emergency management personnel and officials.

- .. Identify special shelters that can accommodate elderly or disabled citizens with things such as wheelchair access, larger restroom facilities and accommodations for service animals for the disabled;
- .. Have the local television stations prepare closed caption evacuation instructions for hearing impaired citizens. Prepare and distribute educational materials in Braille to the vision impaired;
- .. Offer special training to volunteers who will be tasked with assisting disabled evacuation;
- .. Issue photo identification cards for volunteers.

Medical Special Needs Sheltering:

As more citizens experience shortened hospital stays and recuperate at home, emergency managers need to plan shelter options for people needing constant medical supervision. To accommodate these citizens, the Virginia Department of Emergency Services identified Special Needs Shelters. During Hurricane Felix, these shelters were designed to meet the basic health care needs and were staffed with public health nurses, social service workers, volunteers and an ambulance medical team to take emergency cases to the hospital.

Virginia points out this system works well for citizens who are fairly self-sufficient. However, the special needs shelters got calls from citizens who needed too much medical attention (i.e., a patient released from the hospital in a full body cast).

Plan and identify special needs shelters now. Work closely with volunteer agencies, the Departments of Social Services, Health and Mental Health, as well as local hospitals, to plan for disaster special medical needs sheltering.

Problems Associated with Evacuating the Elderly and Disabled:

Aging agencies urge Emergency Management Personnel to consider the following problems their volunteers will face when evacuating the elderly and/or disabled during a disaster:

Delayed Response Syndrome - Elderly persons respond more slowly to a crisis and often don't fully understand the magnitude of their loss, injury or potential dangers.

Fear of Institutionalization - Reassure elderly persons they will receive medical assistance without fear of being placed in a nursing home.

Transfer Trauma - Older citizens fear being removed from their homes.

Sensory Loss - Assess the citizen's ability to see or hear and adapt rescue techniques accordingly.

Hearing Loss - Persons with a hearing loss may appear disoriented and confused. Determine if the individual uses a hearing aid, has it available and operational.

Vision Loss - Persons with visual impairments also need special considerations. Identify yourself and why you are there. Remain calm and reassuring. If possible, take eye glasses with you when evacuating. Allow the person to hold on to your arm during the evacuation process.

Medications - If possible, gather all medications when evacuating the person. Later make a list including the names of the physician and the pharmacy.

Mobility Requirements - Adapt your rescue techniques to the disability (sight, hearing, or wheelchair bound). Allow the individual to tell you how he/she should be assisted.

Special trained companion dogs should be evacuated with their disabled person.

Dementia - Turn off lights and sirens, identify yourself and why you are there; speak slowly using short words in a low pitched voice; ask yes or no questions, repeat the question if necessary, maintain eye contact.

If you need additional information regarding Emergency Evacuation Programs relating to your state, contact your State Emergency Management Agency or the Federal Emergency Management Agency.