

Reducing Disparities in Emergency Preparedness and Response for People with Disabilities

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Background

Disability Populations

According to the most recent Census, almost 50 million people with disabilities reside in the U.S. Of those, 9.3 million people have a sensory disability involving sight or hearing and 21.2 million people are limited in performing basic physical activities, such as walking, climbing stairs, reaching, lifting, or carrying (US Census Bureau, 2000).

Disaster Facts

- 90% of presidential declared disasters result from natural phenomena in which <u>flooding</u> was a major component
- Annually, the U.S. averages 100,000 thunderstorms
- The 1900 Galveston Texas <u>hurricane</u> killed more than 6,000. Death toll from Hurricane Katrina is still unknown, but exceeds 2,000.
- An average of 22 "killer tornados" occur each year.
- About 13,000 <u>earthquakes</u> of various magnitudes occur in the U.S. each year

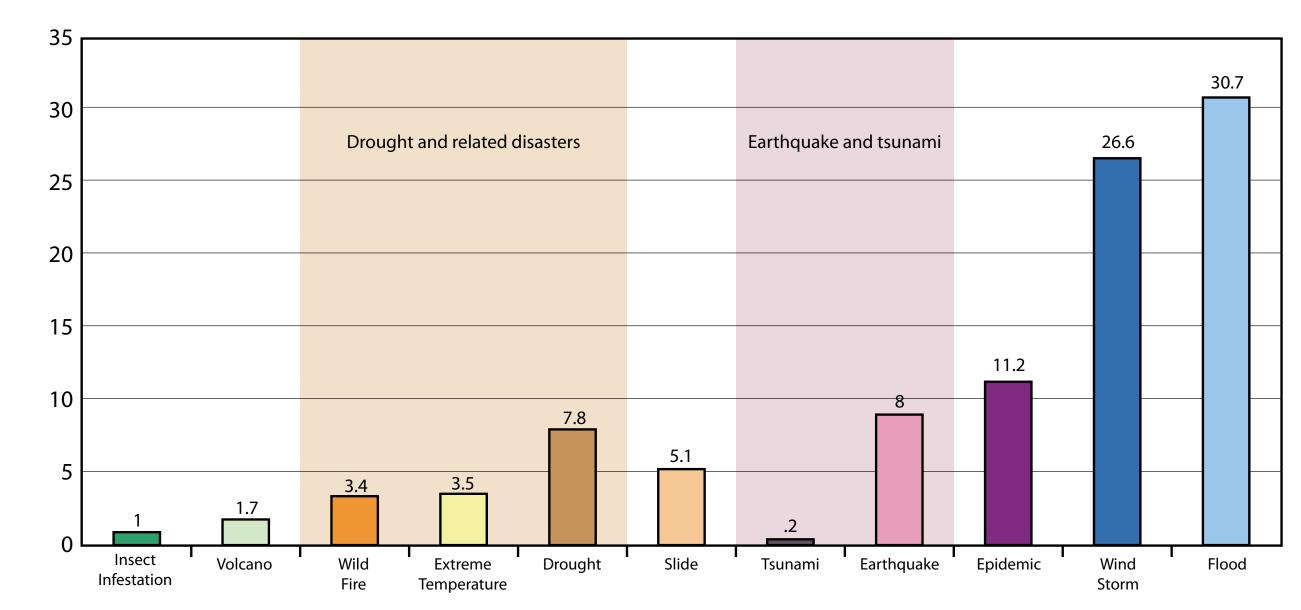


Figure 1. Distribution in percentage of natural disasters by type, 1991-2005 (International Strategy for Disaster Reduction)

Significance of the Problem

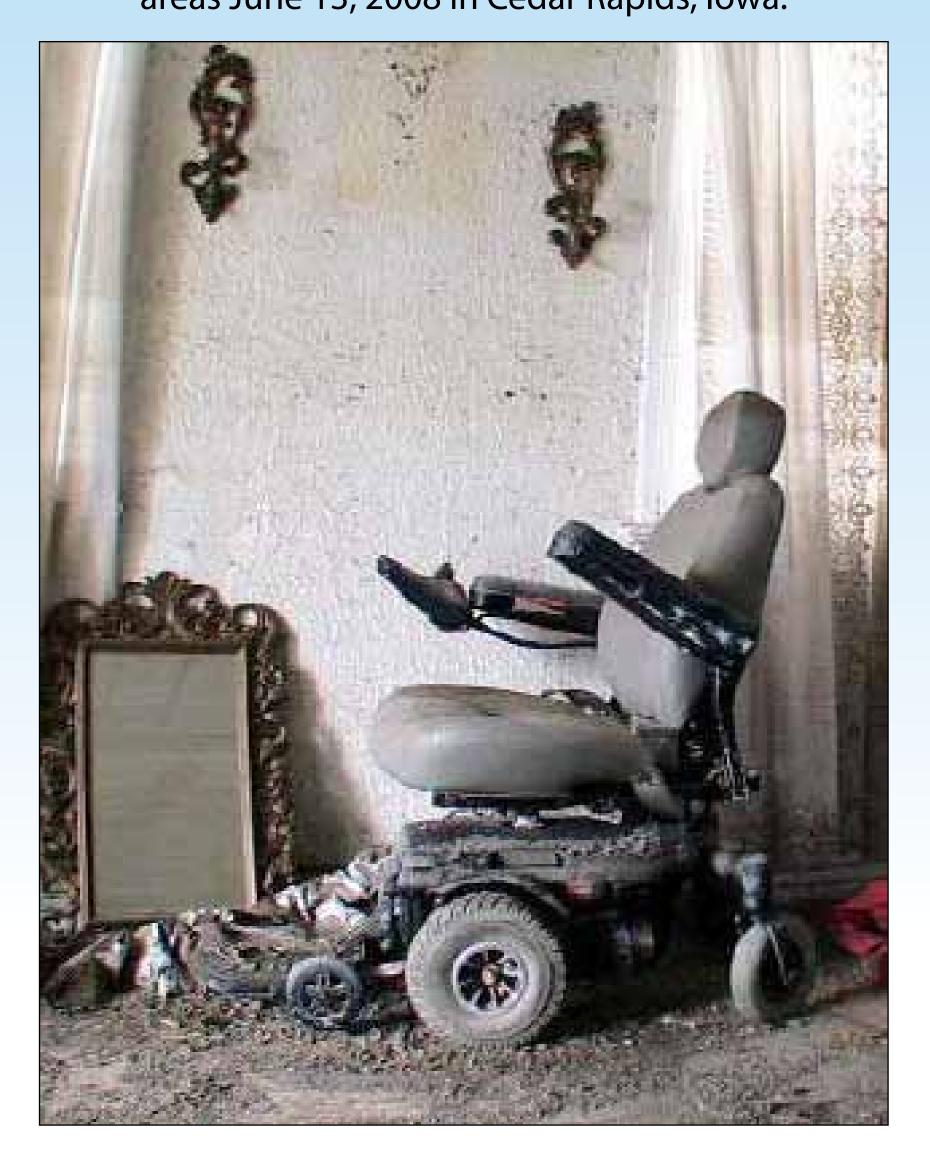
Until recently, people with disabilities have been excluded from the disaster preparedness and planning process (White, 2009). As a result, many people with disabilities experienced life-threatening conditions and faced various challenges during the recent events such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, Hurricane Katrina, and the recent California wildfires. Some of the major barriers experienced by people with disabilities during these disasters included:

- Lack of accessible shelters
- Lack of accommodations (i.e., sign language interpreter, service animal, personal care attendant)
- Lack of accessible transportation from evacuation sites to shelters
- Lack of information regarding how to obtain assistance and resources during and after the disaster
- Difficulty using assistive technology and medical devices due to power outages



An aerial image of downtown shows flood-affected

areas June 13, 2008 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



Abandoned wheelchair in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

Testimony of People with Disabilities Who Experienced Disasters

- "At the temporary shelter I couldn't get to the bathroom, as you had to walk up stairs". California
- "We had a fire at work and the evacuation plan didn't work to get me out. Even so, management refused to change the plan". - Oklahoma
- "Six weeks after the storm, the Red Cross director informed me in a meeting it was not their responsibility to help people with disabilities. That was FEMA's responsibility...The Red Cross told me they didn't get the grant to help people with disabilities". Louisiana

Research Efforts

Investigators at the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas have been conducting an extensive line of research on disaster planning and emergency response for people with disabilities since 2003. A brief summary of RTC/IL projects are described next.

Nobody Left Behind

Aim: To understand county level disaster preparedness and response regarding the needs of persons with mobility impairments

Method: Survey research involving 30 U.S. counties/cities/parishes/boroughs where a natural or man-made disaster occurred between 1998 and 2003 were randomly selected. Phone surveys were conducted to assess whether the local emergency management plans, guidelines, and procedures addressed the needs of persons with mobility impairments.

Results:

- 1. 57% of county managers did not know how many persons with mobility limitations lived within their jurisdiction
- 2. Only 20% of the emergency managers reported having specific guidelines in place to assist people with mobility impairments during emergencies
- 3. People with disabilities either were not represented or had minimal representation in the emergency planning process
- 4. The G197 FEMA Emergency Planning and Special Needs course pertaining to people with disabilities appears useful in increasing county awareness, though only 27% of county emergency managers

reported completing it

Recommendations:

- 1. Provide education and training for first responders as well as people with disabilities
- 2. Include persons with disabilities and representatives of disability-related organizations in the disaster response planning process
- 3. Develop a surveillance system to identify where people with disabilities are located
- 4. Develop local emergency plans that include the needs of persons with disabilities

(White, Fox, Rooney, & Rowland, 2007)

Assessing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina for Persons with Disabilities

Aim: To identify barriers and gaps that emergency personnel have experienced concerning people with disabilities in the affected areas and relocation centers

Method: Qualitative methods combining surveys, focus groups, and interviews of 65 consumers of community disability organizations and 6 emergency managers in the Gulf Coast States

Results: Significant gaps were identified in:

- pre-disaster planning by community disability organizations, individuals with disabilities and local emergency management agencies
- 2. pre- and post-disaster communication and information sharing within community disability organizations, between community disability organizations and consumers, and between local emergency management agencies
- 3. pre- and post-disaster coordination between community disability organizations and other disability agencies, local and regional emergency management organizations, and community supports

Recommendations:

- 1. Develop initiatives to bring disability organizations and emergency management organizations together
- 2. Separate the needs of people with disabilities from other persons with so called "special needs"
- 3. Implement systematic training and education for consumers and CIL staff members
- 4. Make user friendly, evidence-based research findings available to consumers and CIL staff members
- 5. Designate one or more disability contacts at the city and county levels for state emergency management team
- 6. Develop community-wide planning system and identify available resources

(White, Fox, Rooney, & Cahill, 2007).

Recommendations

This section identifies resources and strategies to reduce disparities in disaster planning and emergency response for people with disabilities.

Moving Beyond "Special Needs"

People with disabilities are often categorized as special needs populations. However, "special needs" population can cover much more than half of the U.S. population (See Table 1). Kailes and Enders (2007) recommend that emergency managers and other public health personnel take a function-based approach that address specific issues and needs for context-relevant information to improve readiness in emergency planning, preparedness and recovery and education.

Table 1. List of Special Needs Populations

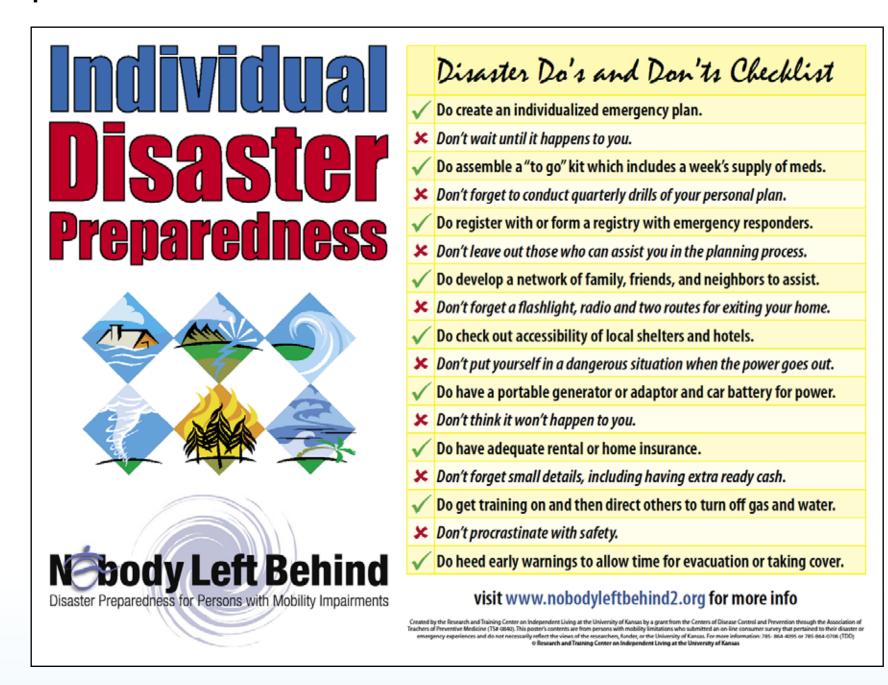
Special Needs Population Category	Population
Children, age 15 and younger	64,272,779
• Elderly, age 65 and older	34,991,753
Non-English speakers (ages 18-64 yrs)	8,279,058
 Noninstitutionalized people with disabilities (ages 18-64 yrs) 	33,153,221
Morbidly obese (BMI of 40 or more)	9 million adults
Zero-vehicle households	10.8 million households
Pregnant women	6 million pregnancies occur ever year in the U.S.
Total	167 million (54% of the U.S. population)

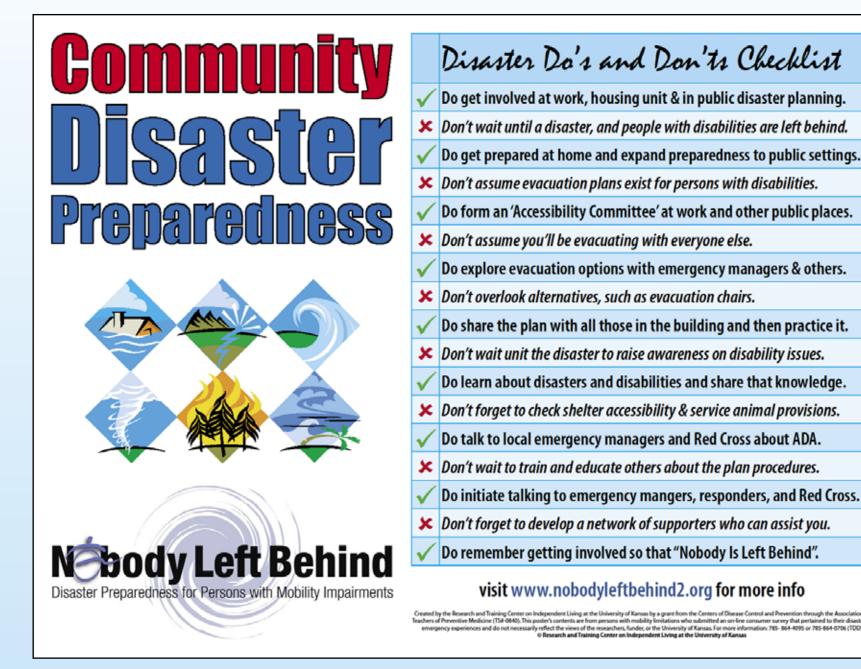
(Source: Kailes & Enders, 2007)

Consumer Direction

Consumer involvement is invaluable to help lead discussions, and to shape policies, guidelines and the future direction of the research agenda. Consumer participation can also facilitate awareness and preparation of the consumers' own personal plans and create a network of key personnel and stakeholders. Collaboration across consumers, community organizations, and state agencies is the key to inclusive and well-structured disaster planning and response efforts.

For instance, the disaster tip sheets below were created based on real life experiences of people with disabilities as a result of consumer involvement after they experienced disasters.





Lessons Learned

The lack of preparedness, education and readiness can cause serious problems for people with disabilities in catastrophic situations. Theses findings emphasize the need for developing a framework, guidelines and strategic action plans that meet the needs of people with disabilities during emergency and disaster events. More importantly, in the spirit of 1848, people with disabilities deserve the same representation, level of security, choices and dignity as their non-disabled peers. Until these basic rights are met, the public safety and health of all citizens are not assured. There is much to be done as people with disabilities are one of most vulnerable groups in disaster and emergency situations.

Resources

The following organizations and websites have useful information on disaster preparedness and emergency response for people with disabilities. Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas

http://www.rtcil.org and http://www.nobodyleftbehind2.org
National Organization on Disability

http://www.nod.org/

The American Association on Health and Disability http://www.aahd.us/

U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment and Policies http://www.dol.gov/odep/programs/emertency.htm
Disability Preparedness

http://www.disabilitypreparedness.gov/

American Red Cross

http://www.prepare.org/disabilities/disabilitiesprep.htm

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Aftermath of Tornado in Greensburg, KS in 2007