

National Preparedness Month – September 2007

OLDER, WISER, SAFER:

Emergency Preparedness and the Elderly

By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

Elderly Americans—65 and older—have earned the right to feel secure.

Throughout their long lives, they have seen, experienced, and handled more crisis situations than most of us could even imagine. Their determination and strength served both their families and their nation. Now the members of this once-unstoppable generation are vulnerable and it is up to us, the beneficiaries of their vitality, to make certain that they remain safe to enjoy their retirement, grandchildren, and place in the sun. According to the United States Administration on Aging (AoA), after an emergency, older people often have difficulty obtaining necessary assistance because of progressive physical and mental impairments. Many older people who live on limited incomes, and sometimes alone, often find it impossible to recover from disasters without special federal assistance services. The AoA goes on to state that elderly people:

- are often slower to register for disaster assistance and, once they are registered, may not follow through and complete the necessary applications to obtain assistance.
- may be at higher nutritional risk in the aftermath of a disaster and may forget to take necessary medications.
- are often targeted by fraudulent contractors and “con men” who financially exploit victims following a disaster.
- may be susceptible to physical and mental abuse as family stresses increase in later stages of the disaster.

Because of problems such as these, it is a good idea to help identify and assist older persons in registering and applying for loans. It is also beneficial to assist in introducing older people in your family or community to federal, state, or local disaster advocacy services.

Financial Concerns

A 2002 article in *Pre-hospital and Disaster Medicine* reported that after an emergency, economic recovery is an area where the elderly fare worse than the non-elderly. Younger age groups are better able to recover financially from a disaster. The inability to recover financially from a disaster can result in a change in the victims' overall standard of living. A study of an area impacted by a tornado found that 32.2% of elderly people reported a drop in their standard of living as compared to 12.5% of the non-elderly. Elderly people have fewer opportunities and less ability to generate income. They are increasingly reliant on Social Security benefits, and are more likely to live near or *at* the poverty level than are the non-elderly.

Another study revealed that almost all of the aid accepted by the elderly was offered rather than requested. Why aren't older Americans asking for the assistance that they are due? Some people speculate that the elderly do not request help because of the perceived stigma that is associated with certain types of aid, such as welfare or mental health assistance. Also, the elderly have expressed an unfounded concern that receipt of aid may impact their other sources of funding, causing a loss of benefits if they exceed a certain income limit. Other elderly, who experienced the Great Depression, have been reluctant to request aid due to their belief that "others could use the aid more."

Medication Concerns

Elderly people should make sure that concerns regarding medication and medical supplies are taken into account during emergency planning. If you take medicine or use a medical treatment on a daily basis, make certain that you have at least a week's supply available, in case of an emergency. If this is not possible, keep as much medicine on hand as possible. Talk to your pharmacist or doctor about what further medical precautions you can take in case of an

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emergency. Also, keep a copy of your prescriptions and dosage or treatment information. If you undergo routine treatments administered by a clinic or hospital or if you receive regular home health care services, speak with your service provider about their emergency plans. They may be able to find backup service providers within the areas that you might evacuate to, in case of an emergency. The Department of Homeland Security recommends that you always have copies of your medical insurance as well as Medicare and Medicaid cards readily available. Also, include copies of important documents in your (waterproof) emergency supply kits. These papers might include family records, wills, power of attorney documents, deeds, social security numbers, credit card and bank information, and tax records. Include the names and numbers of everyone in your personal support network, as well as your medical providers. Be certain to have cash or traveler's checks in your kits, should you need to purchase supplies after a disaster.

Resource 24 – Household and Family Preparedness:

Preparedness Guide for Older Americans

<http://www.ready.gov/america/downloads/olderamericans.pdf>

The Department of Homeland Security posts a downloadable guide geared toward informing older Americans about the importance of emergency preparedness.

Tomorrow: First Things To Do in Household Emergencies

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