

Guest Column – by Arlene de Silva, Chief Operating Officer, Council on Aging
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Lessons learned the hard way: disabled have special needs in disasters

One of the most unforgettable photographs of the Hurricane Katrina aftermath was of an elderly woman with a nursing home aide. They were in the flooded street, the woman in a wheelchair and hooked up to an IV line. The aide, looking terrified, was shouting for help. Who really understood the toll that Katrina would take on those least able to get out of its path?

More than a decade ago, some 800 Chicagoans died when a heat wave descended on their city. Most of them were elderly, many infirm, isolated and living alone. They must have suffered a terrible death, either not understanding the danger they were in or unable to do anything about it. By the time another extreme heat wave came years later, Chicago's city officials and social service agencies had developed a warning and protection plan and they deployed it on a massive scale. Fewer than 10 people died.

The point is: people with functional needs, such as older adults and people with disabilities, need more help than is normally provided through traditional emergency response systems. We know now that this vulnerable group needs help with advance planning – making an emergency plan, gathering supplies – and they will require special assistance *during* an emergency.

Over the past 18 months in southwestern Ohio, we've made some important improvements to emergency planning to be more inclusive of people with special needs. We'll be highlighting some of these efforts with a special event, the first of its kind in our area. It's called *Be Prepared Ohio*.

***Be Prepared Ohio* will be held from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. September 22 at the Sharonville Convention Center, 11355 Chester Road, Sharonville. Admission is free.**

The event is being presented by the Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio and the Emergency Preparedness Collaborative, a group that formed in 2006 to address the special needs of people with disabilities in preparing for and managing their care during emergencies. There are 60 member organizations representing a multi-county area in southwestern Ohio.

Planned for National Preparedness Month, *Be Prepared Ohio* will bring together emergency responders, public health and social service agencies, people with functional needs and their caregivers to share information and resources.

The event will include educational sessions for professionals and the public. Topics include pandemic flu, terrorism, evacuation planning, disaster response in children, and continuity of service to vulnerable populations during emergencies. The sessions will be

presented by local and national experts in emergency preparedness, including representatives from the Red Cross, state and county Emergency Management Agencies, and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

Gov. Ted Strickland will deliver an opening message via video, followed by a welcome from Hamilton County Commissioner, Todd Portune. Ohio Reps. Dale Mallory and Dr. Shawn Webster will speak on the importance of emergency planning and caring for pets during disasters, respectively. A bomb truck and robot will be on hand for demonstrations.

Lanny Taulbee, Disabilities Coordinator for the Division of Kentucky Commission on Community Volunteerism and Service, will deliver the keynote address at 9 a.m. Taulbee advocates for people with disabilities and helps them navigate the maze of disability-related services. He will call on his own experience to speak about emergency planning for the elderly and people with disabilities.

Through continual education efforts such as *Be Prepared Ohio*, we hope to prevent disasters from turning into tragedies.

More information is available by calling 513-345-8643 or visit www.help4seniors.org.

Ms. de Silva is chairperson of the Emergency Preparedness Collaborative.