

Hurricane Challenges for Populations with Unique Needs

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) has the following tips for citizens who have physical, medical, sensory, or cognitive disabilities, as well as the elderly and other populations with unique needs:

- Create a 'Personal Support Network' or 'Self-Help Team'. They can help you identify and acquire resources, as well as assist you before, during and after the hurricane has passed. Your Team should include roommates, relatives, friends, neighbors and co-workers because disasters might strike when you are at home, school, the workplace, a volunteer site, or wherever you spend a lot of time.
- Teach others on your Team to operate any special equipment you might utilize, as well as where you keep your emergency supplies.
- Complete a Personal Assessment of what you can do for yourself and what assistance you may need to respond to the challenges of a hurricane, based on the environment during and after the storm, your capabilities, and your limitations.
- Become informed. Learn your area's vulnerabilities in a hurricane, as well as your Community's Emergency Management Plans including potential evacuation routes and shelter locations.
- Find out about your community's Alerting/Warning Systems. Learn what methods are utilized in your community. They could include: outdoor sirens or horns, the Emergency Alert System (EAS) which provides information over the radio and television, the NOAA Weather Alert Radio, one of a number of automated telephoning systems for sending recorded messages such as 'All Call', 'Reverse 911' or 'Code Red', commercial News Media, Residential Route Alerting, which dispatches Public Safety vehicles through neighborhoods announcing messages with public address systems or literally 'knocking on doors', U.S. Coast Guard Marine Broadcast, and Teletypewriters (TTY).

- Contact your local Emergency Management Director to learn of potential Special Needs Notification, Transportation and/or Assistance Programs in your community. Your specific information will be treated with confidentiality.
- Develop the standard Disaster Supply Kit for your home, with supplies to accommodate you for up to 3-5 days. Also, from that you can pull key items for a 'Portable Kit' if asked to evacuate. Depending upon your needs, you may want to include extra eyeglasses, hearing aid batteries, wheelchair batteries, oxygen, the style and serial number of your medical devices, a list of your medications including dosage, a list of your allergies, medical insurance information and medical cards, and if you utilize a wheelchair include heavy gloves to help make your way over glass and debris.
- Make an Emergency Plan. As part of your overall planning, include a Family Communication Plan to best inform others of your condition and whereabouts. If you receive regular services, make a plan with each provider about their disaster plans and how to contact them. Work with them to identify back-up services.
- Wear medical alert tags or bracelets to help identify your disability.
- Label with your contact information any special equipment including wheel chairs, walkers or canes.
- If asked to evacuate, inform your Team where you are staying, because it may not always be the first choice in your Plan. (a public shelter, relative, friend, hotel, etc.)
- Find the location of the main utility cutoff valves and switches in your home, and how and when to disconnect them during an emergency, either by yourself or a Team member.
- Prepare an Emergency Kit for your service animal and pets; include collars & leashes, a three-day supply of food, a manual can opener, plenty of water, bowls, litter boxes, photographs, and a week's supply of your pet's medications and instructions in case you and your animals are separated.

- Service animals may become frightened or confused during or after a hurricane. Be prepared to calm your animal and keep it confined or on a leash or harness. Make sure your service animal is familiar with your Team members, who may be asked to help care for them following the storm.
- Keep pictures of your pets or service animals for identification purposes, in case you are separated.
- In case your service animal is unable to assist you, be prepared to use alternative ways to negotiate your environment.
- Most people should be able to function well at a regular public shelter, although people with more serious needs might be directed to a “special populations” shelter where medical issues can receive appropriate attention.
- When needed, be sure to ask for an accommodation from disaster personnel.