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SURVIVING AFTER THE STORM:

Protecting persons served and staff in an extended evacuation

By Larry Weishaar

When your organization plans for disaster and possible evacuation, no detail is too unimportant and no “what if” too unlikely. You are, after all, planning for the unplanned and expecting the unexpected.

My employer had implemented plans for disaster preparedness and was experienced in conducting evacuations. When a natural disaster threatened our home sites in the past, we typically moved persons served to a temporary location for one or two nights and then returned them to their largely intact homes.

However, a new dynamic stormed in with Hurricane Katrina—extended evacuation. Displaced individuals could not return to their homes when the storm passed, and many neighborhoods were so severely damaged that individuals will never be able to return to their homes. In some areas, resources and staff to provide support services remain scarce.

The following tips can help you prepare for and manage an extended evacuation. Maintaining quality services for persons served is essential, as is addressing the needs of your staff.

FOCUS ON THE NEEDS OF PERSONS SERVED

- If the disaster can be predicted, evacuate persons served before the event, rather than after. You can lessen overcrowding if you are not competing for transportation and accommodations with other individuals fleeing the disaster. Pre-disaster evacuation can also save lives.

- Ensure that temporary accommodations are accessible if you serve persons with disabilities. A grab bar in a regular

bathtub, for example, does not necessarily make a bathroom accessible. Because of the enormous number of displacements following Hurricane Katrina, we were hard pressed to secure accessible accommodations. Knowing the accommodations needed by each person served can help in identifying appropriate shelter or housing for a temporary relocation.

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- Arrange for medications, treatments, and other supplies for persons served. Using pharmacy services with multiple locations can facilitate prescription filling in case your pharmacy closes.

Keep communication lines open. Displaced persons will naturally try to contact their loved ones. A toll-free telephone number that was answered by staff around the clock provided opportunities to connect for individuals using storm-damaged and overwhelmed telephone services.

- Keep communication lines open. Displaced persons will naturally try to contact their loved ones. We initiated a toll-free telephone number that was answered by staff around the clock. Having the phone line answered any time of the day or night provided more opportunities to connect for individuals using storm-damaged and overwhelmed telephone services. We promoted our toll-free number on our website. We also placed posters with our number and web address at our service sites that were still operating in addition to those that were not habitable.

ANTICIPATE YOUR STAFF'S NEEDS

were destroyed, did not know if their paychecks were credited to their accounts or if they could access their funds. We worked out a system to fund payroll through Western Union so staff members were able to secure their pay in cash if needed.

- Learn who on your staff is capable of helping with evacuating persons served, including on weekends. Find out if staff members have family members they must also look after.
- Arrange for compensation during an extended evacuation. Many of our staff members have paycheck direct deposit, which is normally beneficial. However, some staff members, who banked with small institutions that

- Plan for inevitable overtime in an evacuation. Arrange for how you will compensate exempt and nonexempt staff for the overtime hours that likely will be required.
- Be prepared to assist with staff members' families. Many of our staff members are single parents who evacuated with their children. We provided food and shelter to them in addition to persons served. Eventually, we helped staff arrange for alternative care for their family members, often with extended families.

PREPARE FOR THE NEEDS OF BOTH PERSONS SERVED AND STAFF

- Identify all critical needs data; ensure that they are current; and store backup copies in secure, off-site locations. Electronic copies are advisable because they can be portable and easily retrieved if saved at several remote locations.
- Among the critical needs data, maintain current contact information for families and guardians of persons served, including alternative contacts. Contact information for extended family members (who might not be guardians) proved valuable after Hurricane Katrina. If the immediate families of persons served are displaced, you might need to contact other family members. Also maintain home, cell, and other telephone numbers for staff. Verify contact information at least once a year.
- Other critical needs data might include physician orders and medical records for persons served and payroll records for staff.
- Provide resources for helping persons served and staff cope with the emotional impact of the disaster and loss, such as support groups, counseling, and employee assistance programs.



Let's learn from our mistakes before the next disaster strikes

By Lex Frieden

Special to The Clarion-Ledger

As we forge ahead with recovery and reconstruction in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we have the opportunity and the duty as a nation to establish facilities and communities that are fully accessible to all—without the barriers that currently divide the landscape into a patchwork of islands of access for people with disabilities.

The National Council on Disability urges those who are rebuilding communities and restoring lives to include people with disabilities in all stages of disaster relief, future disaster preparedness, and recovery and reconstruction operations.

We have a critical opportunity to learn from our mistakes.

Hurricane Katrina and Rita survivors report that people with disabilities were an afterthought. Temporary shelters did not have entrances or restrooms accessible to people in wheelchairs; people with disabilities were separated from their families; and evacuees were displaced without assistive technologies.

Mainstream relief entities were severely challenged in serving people with disabilities in matters of finding temporary wheelchairs and vital medications, obtaining Braille and captioned information, or obtaining personal assistance services.

People with disabilities had no centralized source of disability-related information, and relief workers had not been trained to assist them.

Many of these issues remain unresolved, and evacuees with disabilities remain in crisis.

It is critical that relief efforts immediately involve people with disabilities and disability expertise from their communities. Many shelters turned away disability specialists who attempted to serve people with disabilities.

Organizations representing people with disabilities in Louisiana have had great difficulties getting permission from shelters to go into the shelters to identify the needs of evacuees with disabilities and to provide services and referrals.

Disability professionals in the Gulf Coast areas report an impending crisis as Red Cross shelters are being closed with no plans for accessible housing alternatives for people with disabilities.

It is imperative that the Red Cross, FEMA and others involved in relief efforts consult the network of disability experts and service providers in their areas to address immediate disability issues. Communities must involve people with disabilities in emergency preparedness planning and future relief and recovery efforts. Additionally, as we undertake an unprecedented reconstruction effort in rebuilding in the Gulf Coast region, we can create an entire region of the country that will serve as a model of accessibility and inclusion.

The National Council on Disability urges Congress, the administration and the affected cities and states to ensure that all government funding for disaster preparedness, recovery and reconstruction activities involve people with disabilities during all stages, and further, that all rebuilt and newly built infrastructure is fully accessible to and usable by people with disabilities in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. ■■

About the author: Lex Frieden, a former CARF board member, is chairperson of the National Council on Disability, based in Washington, D.C. This article is reproduced with the council's permission and may also be read on the council's web site at www.ncd.gov/newsroom/inthenews/frieden_01-07-06.htm.



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- Allow time and a place for staff and persons served alike to rest and tend to their personal affairs in private.

We hope a disaster the scale of Hurricane Katrina never recurs. Yet we know it is a possibility and must be prepared. Careful planning to meet the needs of persons served, your staff, and their families can substantially reduce chaos and distress if a disaster strikes. ■■

About the author: A rehabilitation professional for more than 20 years, Larry Weishaar has served as vice president for support services at ResCare, Inc., since 1998. In this position, he oversees the company's quality management systems, customer satisfaction, and critical incident management.

Among its many therapeutic and educational services, ResCare provides residential supports to persons with developmental or other disabilities and in-home services to older adults and persons with disabilities. Headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, ResCare offers services in 36 states; Washington, D.C.; Puerto Rico; and Ontario, Canada.

After Hurricane Katrina swept through Louisiana in 2005, Mr. Weishaar helped 75 persons served by ResCare relocate to temporary housing in Indiana and Texas. Since then, he has helped these displaced individuals return to their restored homes or find replacement housing.

Mr. Weishaar holds a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation and a master's in public administration.



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