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How to Develop a Disaster Action Plan for Older, Distant Relatives

By Jane Irene Kelly

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Every family should be prepared to cope with disaster. To help insure the safety of your older family members, be sure your emergency action plan includes them, whether they are residing in assisted living facilities or nursing homes, or even living independently, where they may not have access to help in a disaster.

"It is bold to assume that an older family member will be taken care of if disaster strikes," says Regina Phelps, emergency management and contingency planning expert, and founder of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions, a San Francisco-based consulting and training firm. Staff members at some facilities might leave to take care of their own families, adds Phelps. "It is important to speak with the person who is in charge of the facility, and find out what community resources would be available to [your loved one] in an emergency."

Also, staff at skilled nursing facilities may not have the training needed to care for your family member after a disaster, notes Phelps, and they may simply call 911 for help or rely on assistance from the Red Cross.

Therefore, "you should develop a family communication strategy," Phelps recommends. Select an out-of-state contact person as the hub, and train her or him for that role. The person should have a list of the individuals who are likely to call and should know to ask three questions: 1) how is the caller doing, physically; 2) where is the caller at that moment; and 3) where is the caller going next.

Now, take these 7 other steps to prepare your older family members for a disaster:

- **Assemble essential supplies.** Create disaster-supply kits that include items specific to your relatives' health and personal needs. Do they need an extra pair of eyeglasses, hearing aid batteries, extra wheelchair batteries, or a supply of oxygen? What sort of personal hygiene items do they require?
- **Stock up on prescription medications.** Older Americans should keep an emergency supply of prescription medications that can last "at least a week," advises Phelps. "After an emergency, they may not be able to get to a drugstore to get their medication." It's also smart to have physical copies of prescriptions from doctors, Phelps says.
- **Organize key documents and phone numbers.** Make sure your older family member has the name and phone number of her insurance agent, as well as the numbers of non-local relatives and friends. Have a list of contact information for her doctors, as well as medical insurance and Medicare cards.
- **Include personal items for comfort.** "Some seniors—no matter how capable

under normal situations—can become very childlike and disoriented in a disaster situation," warns Phelps. Tucking a few small personal items, such as family photos, in an emergency kit, can help provide comfort, she suggests.

- **Establish a communications strategy.** Make sure all family members know whom they should check in with following a disaster. Remember to have an out-of-state contact because local phone lines often get jammed in a crisis. Consider having a prepaid phone card in your loved one's emergency kit.
- **Create an emergency plan for pets.** "No matter how bad the situation is, many older people will refuse to leave their homes if it means leaving their pets behind," says Phelps, who suggests that an emergency action plan also be in place for animal companions. Have pet carriers handy, and consider having harnesses for dogs that may be rattled by an emergency. Also, remember that shelters don't always take pets; FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) suggests getting in touch with a local animal shelter or emergency management office, or talking to a veterinarian, to find out what options pets have if they must be left behind.
- **Assess a loved one's living situation.** Just because an older family member resides in a facility such as a nursing home does not guarantee that he will be looked after in a crisis. Talk to those who manage the facility, or even local emergency services people, to determine what may happen to your loved one if disaster strikes. Also, communicate your plan of action to your loved one, so he knows what he should do in an emergency if left to fend for himself.

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