

By Adrienne Arkontaky, Esq.

How to Prepare For an Emergency:

For Persons with Disabilities and Their Caregivers

On July 12, 2006 during the evening rush hour, the sky above my home in Hawthorne, N.Y. grew extremely dark. The winds became so strong that lawn furniture was thrown about and planters outside the house tumbled across the grass.

As I peered outside I knew something was wrong, but it didn't occur to me that an F-2 tornado had just touched down in the hamlet of Hawthorne, until my husband called me on my cell phone.

He was clearly shaken by the fact that just one-half mile from our home there were reports that the twister had tossed a car in the air and a commercial building in close proximity had suffered significant damage. Fortunately, our home was spared. However, neighbors' homes were without power and telephone service for weeks and several homes had substantial roof damage. Trees were uprooted and there was record flooding in nearby areas due to the heavy rain.

Safety First

Two of my daughters, Jenna, 8, and Jordan, 15, were home at the time. My eldest daughter, Justine, 19, was working. I quickly sent her a text message and was relieved when she replied that she was also fine.

My next concern was my daughter Jordan's safety. Jordan is multiply handicapped and in a wheelchair. She is non-ambulatory and it is difficult for caregivers to lift her quickly and transport her in the event of an emergency, especially when carrying her up and down stairs. I remember trying to remove the safety harness from the wheelchair so that we could lift her quickly if necessary and transport her to a safer place. Jordan also has a respiratory problem and uses a nebulizer on a daily basis, which requires a power source. During the summer months, she must stay in an air-conditioned room since she lacks the capacity to regulate her body temperature. What would happen if our home lost power?

These are only a few concerns that arise during natural and other disasters. They intensify when one is dealing with a family member with disabilities. Even people with disabilities who are self-sufficient under normal circumstances may



Attorney Adrienne Arkontaky, whose practice focuses on special needs planning, special education advocacy and guardianship, with her children Justine, Jordan, Jenna and husband Peter.

not be able to function as well in an emergency situation. Persons with special needs often need extra time to make preparations for an emergency.

Develop a Plan

All families should take the time to develop an emergency plan, especially when a loved one has special needs. It is important to consider what the lowest level of functioning might be for that person and plan for it accordingly. Remember that, in many emergencies, you might not be able to travel the way you normally would. Families should try to anticipate the challenges ahead such as lack of power, phone services, housing, transportation and food and water.

Identify safe places to go during an emergency, depending on what type of disaster has occurred. You may need to do extra planning when you have a loved one with special needs because of problems with transporting the individual, so plan carefully. Steps and doorways may present additional challenges. Practice different ways out of a building in case stairways and halls are blocked. Rehearse lifting techniques for non-ambulatory individuals.

Families should also know how disasters might affect the emotional well-being of loved ones with disabilities. They may become anxious, irritable and extremely fearful. Another important factor to consider is the effect of the emergency on caregivers and even service animals. Guide dogs may become disoriented and very frightened. Caregivers may not be able to care for the person with disabilities due to the effect of the disaster on the caregiver themselves. I recommend that families include "comfort items" in their emergency kits such as books, music or toys to assist in calming the child or adult with disabilities.

Provisions and Communication

When a disaster occurs, the first priority is to provide for everyone's basic needs. A person with disabilities may have very different needs so families must plan carefully. A basic tenet is to provide seven days or more of food and hydration. For some people with disabilities, that may mean seven days of g-tube feedings, oxygen, medications and an alternative power source for nebulizers and respirators. Work with health care providers to get extra supplies of medications and copies of prescriptions for the emergency kit.

Agree on alternate means of communication during disasters. Remember that disasters may result in family members in the same location not being able to easily communicate with one another. You may decide on a signal or whistle to communicate. You may discuss using a visual sign such as a flag outside your home to indicate assistance is needed.

Secure Support

Organize a "network" or "personal support" team that can check on the loved one with disabilities in the event of an emergency. Give these people written instructions on how to care for the person during an emergency. Keep written instructions on how to use appropriate medical equipment and give the support team copies. Make sure that the team knows the loved one's capabilities and limitations during an emergency. One of the most important things you can do is to compile an emergency information list for the person with disabilities. This list should identify the medical needs and providers' contact information in case of an emergency. The list should include the names and dosages of all medications.

Find out what facilities are available in your community in case of a disaster and whether those facilities are capable of handling persons with disabilities (look at accessibility issues). Alert your local fire department, police department and power company that a person with disabilities resides in your home and what the specific needs are of the individual. Many times, the power companies can provide a back up generator if the individual has medical needs that require a power source. You also might consider purchasing a back up generator.

You may also want to check with your insurance agent about what types of disasters your insurance covers. Agencies such as the American Red Cross and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are great resources for helping families plan for an emergency. They provide checklists and literature on how to prepare for emergencies.

Also remember to review your plan on a regular basis and be sure that your supplies are kept current. And although disasters are not predictable, with careful planning at least you can have peace of mind that you have done everything within your control to plan for your loved one's safety and well-being. ♦

Adrienne Arkontaky is an attorney with Littman Krooks LLP with offices in White Plains, Fishkill and Manhattan. Her practice focuses exclusively on special needs planning, special education advocacy and guardianship for families of children with disabilities. She is a member of the Committee on Issues Affecting Persons with Disabilities for the New York State Bar Association and lectures frequently to advocacy groups on special needs planning and special education laws.



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