

Disaster Planning for Persons with Special Needs

The Southeast is no stranger to drought, hurricanes, wildfires, and other disasters that leave a path of death and destruction. That's why it's important to prepare, particularly for persons that have special needs. Anyone with special health needs due to age, physical limitations, or illness will need to devote more time and effort to both the planning and the supply gathering stage of disaster preparedness. Disaster planning for persons with special needs should include pre-disaster preparation and establishing a personal support network.



Figure 1. Older adult with cane.
(Photo by Fouquier □, Flickr)

Pre-Disaster Preparation

Vehicles

If a natural disaster is looming, be sure your vehicle's gas tank is at least half full. That way if mandatory evacuation is called or power is lost, you stand a greater chance of getting to a designated shelter. Besides, a person with physical limitations should avoid waiting for mandatory evacuation or risk being stuck in an impossible traffic jam.

Stocking a GO bag

A well-stocked *emergency GO bag* can get you through the rough times during natural or manmade disaster such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, floods, fires, or possible terrorist attacks.

- When packing your *emergency GO bag* be sure to include the following important family documents in a waterproof container: medical records, wills, deeds, social security numbers, charge and bank account numbers, and tax records. An easier and safer method is to save copies of all this information electronically to an account in cloud storage and to keep a reminder of your cloud access information in your emergency GO bag. You should also include the printed short-form, easy-to-read directions for operating any medical equipment or life-saving devices required. Persons with a communication problem should carry copies of a short handout explaining their preferred method of communication ready to share with first responders or other strangers they might come in contact with during or after a disaster.

For example: *"Hi, I'm (your name) and I have trouble hearing. Please speak slowly and face me so I can read your lips. No need to yell, it doesn't help. If you've got a pad and pen we can use, then things will go even better."*

When stocking emergency supplies for home and emergency car *GO bags*, be sure to include at least a 3-day supply of the following:

- Water: a minimum of 1 gallon of water per person per day. Diabetics may experience high blood sugar levels (hyperglycemia) during a disaster that causes them to become dehydrated. So, err on the side of caution if possible and stock more water for diabetics.

- Food: non-perishable, no-prep, no-cook food items at about 1200 calories per person per day. Include low-glycemic nutrition bars for anyone with diabetes and be mindful of possible food allergies.
- First-aid supplies to last a week for each person. These supplies can be store bought or self-assembled. A useful item to add to your kit is bubble wrap. It is inexpensive and can be used to make a soft splint of just about any size. Be sure to include over-the-counter meds for pain, fever, diarrhea, allergies, and colds, and a CPR face mask. Also, be sure that persons who qualify wear a medical ID bracelet or necklace.
- For persons with special needs, it may be important to include medication and additional medical supplies in the *emergency GO bag*. As with any *GO bag*, it should be stored in an accessible location whether in a car, or at home, work or school. However, there are a number of difficulties to confront when it comes to stocking prescription medication. For example, if you or a person in your family is diabetic and on insulin, you cannot easily store insulin since it has to be kept under 86°F. So, you will need to store it under refrigeration at work and/or at home and be prepared to use an alternative cooling method if an emergency occurs. One method is to place your insulin in an insulated lunch bag with an ice pack or even frozen food from your freezer. However, do not place the insulin directly on the frozen items. This will work for one day only. A better method is to purchase an insulin cooling case.

It may be impossible to get an advance dosage of some medications in order to leave a week's worth in one or more emergency bags. Actually, some medications are so highly controlled that it is impossible to get ANY extra medication.



Figure 2. Diabetes kit.
(Photo by stevepb, pixabay.com)

In fact, there are medications that are needed daily that require a newly written prescription every 30 days--even on 31-day months! Diabetics also need to have a supply of fast-acting sugar such as glucose tablets or canned or boxed fruit juice.

Be sure to include copies of all prescriptions and a printed copy of each daily medication routine in case someone else has to dispense medication.

- Personal hygiene items for all family members, including toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet paper, soap, hand cleaner, paper towels, and feminine hygiene products that may double as bandages. If possible, include a portable toilet with lid, toilet tissue, etc.
- One or more communication devices and one or more power sources such as batteries, solar, or a crank.
- Tools to assist you in turning off your gas and water connections, as well as for making basic repairs.
- A blanket for everyone in your family.
- A change of sturdy clothes and shoes per person.
- Flashlight or lantern with a power source and batteries.

- Something to use as a shelter in case your home is inhabitable.
- Cash in small bills since it is unlikely that credit and/or debit cards will work if the electrical power is out.
- Extra glasses or contact lenses even if it's your last prescription.
- An extra set of car and house keys.
- Also include the serial number and style of any medical implants (pacemaker, insulin pump, etc.)
- Pack something to keep yourself and the others in your family occupied—toys, books, cards, and board games. Don't forget about your service animal or other pets.

Have your home *GO bag* ready to grab and go at a moment's notice at the exit you will use when leaving your home. If you are out and if you or a family member have medication restrictions, it's possible that you may have to return home to retrieve your *GO bag* before fully evacuating the area – provided that it's safe.

Don't forget to rotate items out periodically to maintain freshness.

Pet GO bag for Service Animals

If you have a service animal you will have to pack a *pet GO bag* as well, with a 3-day supply of many of the same items needed in any *GO bag*.

- Water: dogs require an average of 1 cup of water a day for every 10 pounds of weight. So, a 50-pound dog would need about 5 cups of water daily.



*Figure 2. Service dogs in action.
(Photo courtesy of reader of the pack, Flickr)*

- Food: place in airtight, waterproof containers. Pack a manual can opener if needed.
- First-aid supplies: talk to your vet. In your bag include flea and tick prevention, gloves, and a pet first-aid reference book.
- Any medicines your animal is currently on and copies of medical records and registration information in a waterproof container.
- An extra collar with ID tag and leash.
- Sanitation items such as newspapers, sanitation pads, paper towels, and trash bags.
- A picture of you and your service animal together to prove ownership should you become separated.
- Some familiar items such as toys or a blanket to provide comfort.

Again, don't forget to rotate items out periodically to maintain freshness.

Personal Support Network

If you know that you will need physical help during a disaster, line up a *personal support network* to help you. Your personal support network can consist of family, friends, and/or neighbors. They just need to be reliable people who know what your emergency plan is and are prepared to help you if necessary. Include individuals who live nearby and can get to you quickly when the need arises and at least one who lives far enough away not to be involved in the same disaster so as to be available to assist after the disaster. Make sure your personal support network members know where you keep your emergency supplies, how to operate all your medical equipment, and are familiar with your medications.

When making your emergency preparations at work and school, ask about the emergency action plans already in place and what supplies they have on hand. If your place of work or school does not have a plan in place recommend that they get prepared and offer to help. If there is a complete emergency supply kit at your school or workplace, then you will just need to bring your specific supplies such as medications, in their original bottles. And recommend that others in similar circumstances do the same. Be sure to rotate out your medication to keep the supply on hand current.

Conclusion

Whether you are an able-bodied caretaker of someone who has medical, access, functional limitations, or the elderly, or if you have special needs, be sure to prepare a well thought out disaster plan complete with an *emergency GO bag* that is adequate to cover your needs for at least 3 days.



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