

# **CONGREGATIONS WHO CARE – PREPARE**

## **How Congregations of All Faiths Can Prepare to Assist People with Disabilities During Man-made or Natural Disasters**

The congregations of America are more aware of the need to prepare for a man-made or natural disaster than they were prior to September 11, 2001. Through television and other media, the nation is powerfully and graphically alerted to hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, blizzards, earthquakes, terrorist attacks and wildfires, as well as the resulting destruction, homelessness, injury and death that follow. Sadly we have learned that children and adults with disabilities and their families are more vulnerable during and after these disasters.

People, with and without disabilities, can reduce the impact of disaster by taking precautionary measures to prepare in case an event occurs. In November 2001, the National Organization on Disability (N.O.D.) launched the Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI), a program to address the special concerns of the nation's disability community and to ensure that people with all types of disabilities are included in emergency planning at all levels. The website of this award-winning program is [www.nod.org/emergency](http://www.nod.org/emergency). EPI is the sister program of N.O.D.'s Religion and Disability Program (R&DP) which works with congregations, national faith groups and seminaries. The R&DP website is at [www.nod.org/religion](http://www.nod.org/religion). The telephone number for both programs is (202) 293-5960.

Following the terrorist attacks in the fall of 2001 and the recent hurricanes in the Gulf Region, congregations have fulfilled their scriptural mandate to offer hospitality and help those in need. People of all faiths have contributed millions of dollars and countless hours assisting older adults and people with disabilities. Congregations of all faiths have provided transportation, medical care, housing, food, clothing and tutoring to Americans with physical, sensory, psychiatric and intellectual disabilities. People of faith from America's congregations continue to make a critical difference in disaster recovery.

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### Specific Steps a Congregation Can Take to Assist People with Disabilities Before a Man-made or Natural Disaster

**Coordination** A congregation can join with other congregations and volunteer groups to assess preparedness efforts in their community and plan for disaster before it happens. This preplanning, grounded in cooperation, will reduce duplication of services. Congregations can be guided through this planning process by joining National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). A visit to its website at [www.nvoad.org](http://www.nvoad.org) offers information about the coordinating and advocacy services offered by NVOAD or an affiliated state VOAD member.

Also, consult EPI's [Interactive Map of Disability and Emergency Preparedness Resources](#). The map houses information on your regional branch of FEMA, your state Citizen Corps and American Red Cross Chapters, as well as links to your state and local Emergency Management Agencies, and is a good place to start gathering the information most useful to you.

This type of coordination and planning must be very specific. For example, during and after a disaster, one congregation could provide the services of two sign-language interpreters and store extra hearing aid batteries; another congregation which has a religious education program for children with mild to severe disabilities could offer the services of the professionals who staff the program; another congregation, which operates a shelter for people without homes, could offer its wheelchair accessible restroom and shower; another congregation with a parish nurse might offer her services; and a congregation which provides meals could store the equipment that children and adults with disabilities might need, including flexible straws, adaptive silverware and dishes, sodium and sugar-free snacks and beverages, gluten-free products and tables that can easily be raised to accommodate a wheelchair user.

**Education** A congregation or a cluster of congregations could sponsor an Emergency Preparedness Town Hall Day or Awareness Day similar to a Health Fair. Resources and materials to be distributed at these events can be found on the EPI website at [www.nod.org/emergency](http://www.nod.org/emergency). Likewise any time there is a celebratory fair, congregations can staff a booth with information about emergency preparedness for people with disabilities,

including information about the TV and radio Emergency Alert Stations and [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration \(NOAA\)](#) weather radios with audible, flashing and vibrating alerts. Central to the message for everyone is that it takes more time to evacuate if you have a disability or a family member with disability.

These events can be publicized using energizing words such as “Get Informed”, “Get Involved”, “Create Partnerships” and “Make a Plan.” Because congregations are trusted to disburse health and safety information, they are ideally positioned to promote an emergency preparedness message.

**Training** A congregation can sponsor several members for [Citizen Emergency Response Training \(CERT\)](#) that is offered by the Department of Homeland Security’s Citizen Corps program ([www.citizencorps.gov](#)). CERT is offered nationwide to people with and without disabilities who are trained to understand triage and the chain of command following a disaster, as well as to do basic search and rescue and first aid. Or a congregation could encourage its members to obtain American Red Cross training ([www.redcross.org](#)). Once again, this gives a congregation an opportunity to be informed, involved and prepared.

**Personal Planning** A congregation, through its ordained and lay leaders, can make sure members prepare personally for a man-made or natural disaster. One of the congregation's leaders, who happens to have a disability, could lead a seminar on this subject and distribute the N.O.D. Emergency Preparedness Initiative brochure, found on the website at [www.nod.org/emergency](#), entitled [“Prepare Yourself: Disaster Readiness Tips for People with Disabilities.”](#) People with disabilities know best their own abilities and needs before, during and after a disaster. Using a simple checklist, people with disabilities and their families can identify resources, make a plan, create a “ready kit” and a “go kit.” Each person, with and without a disability, can decrease the impact of a disaster by taking steps to prepare before an event occurs.

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