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Preparing for disaster in a nursing home or AL facility

Although it's been seven years, the deaths of 35 seniors during Hurricane Katrina remain a reminder of the vulnerability of nursing home residents. Already this year, the U.S. has experienced 19 federal Major Disaster declarations, including wildfires, hurricanes, flooding and more. So who's looking out for *your* residents?

Start with a Plan

Federal regulations now require senior living facilities to have an emergency plan. However, **in a recent report issued** by the Department of Health and Human Services found that many facilities remain deficient in disaster response training for staff. The best-laid plans mean nothing without proper training and practice.



Vivian Marinelli,
Psy.D.

A good disaster plan should:

- Be developed with an all-hazards approach.
- Be approved by your state or local licensing agency.
- Include evacuation and **Shelter-in-Place** plans (A shelter-in-place plan is one where everyone gathers in an interior location, preferably one without windows, and stays inside until the all-clear is given).
- Collaborate with local emergency management agencies.
- Utilize communication contingencies, including social media for the family members. Keep an emergency and wireless line just for loved ones to connect.
- Include relocation assistance and transportation resources—practice aeromedical and ground patient movement.
- Have a process of notifying family members (update and test your family contact lists on a regular basis).
- Include a checklist of necessary provisions—at least a three-day supply of nonperishable food, a gallon of water per day, per person.

Residents in assisted living facilities or nursing homes often rely on electricity-dependent medical equipment, such as oxygen compressors, for survival. Pay special attention to:



- Resident medical concerns (physical and psychological)
- Resident-specific needs (i.e., feeding tubes, oxygen, wheelchair)
- Prescriptions
- Medical records
- The emotional impact of event on residents. This, combined with physical concerns, can make the elderly especially vulnerable. Plan to have counselors available if needed.

A copy of your written plan should be readily available, along with other emergency items like batteries, sanitation items, first-aid kits and flashlights. All staff members should be assigned to cover a certain area, and someone should be designated to shut off the gas, power and/or water lines if needed.

Engage Staff in Training and Drills

Don't wait until disaster strikes. The plans should be updated and put to the test on a regular basis, at least annually. New hires must review the plan as part of their training. Keep in mind that disasters do not always happen during full-staff hours. If the plan is operational and provides specific information and guidance to the staff, the crisis will still be a challenge. However, the ability of staff to protect residents' health, safety and welfare, along with their own, will be enhanced. As a result, the resiliency of the residents, staff and the organization will also be improved.

When prospective families are touring your facility, mention your emergency plan to them. While they might not think to ask about a plan, knowing it's there will give them peace of mind.

Vivian Marinelli, Psy.D., is the senior director of crisis management Services for FEI Behavioral Health. She holds a doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology and is a licensed psychologist in Wisconsin. She has provided support to the families and customers connected with Egypt Air 990, the hijacked passengers of Saudi Arabian Flight 115, Air Transat Flight 236's emergency landing, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, bombings in Islamabad and Jakarta, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Colgan Flight 3407, Haiti Earthquake and UPS Flight 6 crash in Dubai.

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