



In each issue of *ALC*, we will ask a panel of experts to comment on a pressing issue of the day. Watch for this roundtable, and let us know if you have any suggestions regarding experts you would like to hear from or questions you would like to see addressed.

Do most assisted living facilities have emergency preparedness plans in place? What should such plans address?



Willie Orr, MD
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I think everyone has learned from Katrina. People who previously never thought about emergency preparedness or who put it on the back burner now see a need to have plans in place to deal with disasters. We have policies on Day Center closings in case of emergencies which specify who makes the call regarding closings and who is responsible for carrying a list of participants and their phone numbers at all times so that these individuals can be notified of the closing. We also maintain a list of what individuals are most in need of home visits. Our policy on blizzards refers more to the obligation of reporting to work by employees. Of course, it is important that any policies be communicated clearly to all stakeholders. This information should be reviewed and promoted on a regular basis. It is important not to put the effort into writing good policies and then letting them collect dust on a shelf.

In light of Katrina, facilities are finding that staff members are more interested in emergency planning. Our emergency officer says that,

since Katrina, employees have been more willing to hear about safety issues. Perhaps this is something good that has come out of this tragedy. What we do today hopefully will prevent similar situations in the future.

We do not use telemedicine or other technologies. However, such devices might have some utility enabling facilities to monitor and communicate with residents when an evacuation is necessary. Of course, many such devices run on electricity, so they likely would be rendered useless in the event of a power outage. Nonetheless, PDAs and other handheld devices can help keep staff connected in an emergency, and they give physicians access to resident-specific information that enables them to provide uninterrupted care. So this may be another driver to increase the use of computerized physician order entry and other technological tools in settings such as assisted living. Speaking of computers, I think Katrina probably was a strong reminder that it is essential to back-up data and keep copies of resident records and other information at a remote—but secure—location.

We can't always prevent disasters, but preparation can help minimize damages. It also keeps our seniors safe and secure; and that is the ultimate goal.

Nancy Losben, PharmD
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NeighborCare encourages facilities to have emergency plans in place and always have resources such as distilled water onsite. It is important to consider “what if” and devise a workable solution to potential emergencies. What will you do if the power goes down? What if an ice storm takes down the phone lines? Where will residents go if they have to be evacuated? While

there are some geographical locations that are more prone to disasters than others, everyone needs a plan. And this plan—along with a communication tree—must be kept current at all times.

Much of this planning is just common sense. If phone communication is cut off, have arrangements for the pharmacy to stop by and pick up orders. If inclement weather is predicted, make sure that residents have a certain number of days' supply of medications and check to see that everyone has what

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he or she needs. While there sometimes isn't any warning for a disaster, we usually know when a snowstorm, for example, is predicted. We really need to count on weather reports and take them seriously.

Evacuation plans need to consider the type of residents you have and what destination will enable them to receive the care they need. For example, if a resident uses an oxygen tank, he or she needs to go someplace where someone knows how to use and maintain this equipment. Facilities need to make sure that residents—as well as staff—know about evacuation plans. Emergency preparedness actually makes a good topic for a lunch or evening presentation with residents and family members.

It is good for family members to have emergency plans as well, and facilities can offer them tips about what these plans should include.

Many assisted living and senior communities have pets onsite, so it is important to have a plan that includes them as well. This may involve making arrangements with an area animal shelter, veterinary clinic, or boarding facility. It is important to put any agreements in writing, including how animals will be transported and how long they will be kept. Find out in advance if you will be required to supply food and/or proof of inoculations. If residents' family members agree to take pets in case of an emergency, get this in writing as well.

Clearly, emergency preparedness must cover everything from soup to nuts and make no assumptions. For example, having a generator to deal with a power outage is not enough. You need to make sure that you have one that will be reliable in an emergency and will meet your needs; and you need to have enough fuel in stock. I knew someone who had one that had to be kickstarted by an electrical charge. This won't do you any good when the power is out. Again, planning for emergencies means thinking about all the "what ifs" and devising appropriate answers.



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Understandably, people in the Northeast are less likely to be worried about disasters such as hurricanes or earthquakes. However, floods, fires, and other crises can occur anywhere; so it is important to have emergency preparedness plans in place.

Emergency Preparedness Tips

The Department of Homeland Security offers a number of tips for emergency preparedness. The top 12 are listed below. To view the others, see the Homeland Security Web site at www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/interapp/editorial/editorial_0711.xml.

Preparedness Tip #1

Take a moment to imagine that there is an emergency, like a fire in your home, and you need to leave quickly. What are the best escape routes from your home? Find at least two ways out of each room. Now, write it down—you've got the beginning of a plan.

Preparedness Tip #2

Pick a place to meet after a disaster. Designate two meeting places. Choose one right outside your home, in case of a sudden household emergency, such as a fire. The second place you choose needs to be outside your neighborhood, in the event that it is not safe to stay near or return to your home.

Preparedness Tip #3

Choose an emergency contact person outside your area because it may be easier to call long distance than locally after a local/regional disaster. Take a minute now to call or e-mail an out-of-town friend or family member to ask him or her to be your family's designated contact in the event of an emergency. Be sure to share the contact's phone number with everyone in the family. During an emergency, you can call your contact who can share with other family members where you are; how you are doing; and how to get in contact with you.

Preparedness Tip #4

Complete an emergency contact card and make copies for each member of your family to carry with them. Be sure to include an out-of-town contact on your contact card. It may be easier to reach someone out of town if local phone lines are out of service or overloaded. You should also have at least one traditionally wired landline phone, as cordless or cellular phones may not work in an emergency. Visit www.redcross.org or www.ready.gov for sample emergency contact cards.

Preparedness Tip #5

Dogs may be man's best friend, but due to health regulations, most emergency shelters cannot house animals. Find out in advance how to care for your pets and working animals when disaster strikes. Pets should not be left behind, but could be taken to a veterinary office, family member's home or animal shelter during an emergency. Also be sure to store extra food and water for pets. For more information, visit the Animal Safety section on www.redcross.org or visit the Humane Society Web site at www.hsus.org

Preparedness Tip #6

Go through your calendar now, and put a reminder on it — every six months — to review your plan, update numbers, and check supplies to be sure nothing has expired, spoiled, or changed. Also remember to practice your tornado, fire escape, or other disaster plans.

Preparedness Tip #7

Check your child's school Web site or call the school office to request a copy of the school's emergency plan. Keep a copy at home and work or other places where you spend a lot of your time and make sure the school's plan is incorporated into your family's emergency plan. Also, learn about the disaster plans at your workplace or other places where you and your family spend time.

Preparedness Tip #8

Teach your children how and when to call 9-1-1 or your local Emergency Medical Services number for help. Post these and other emergency telephone numbers by telephones.

Preparedness Tip #9

Practice. Conduct fire drills and practice evacuating your home twice a year. Drive your planned evacuation route and plot alternate routes on a map in case main roads are blocked or gridlocked. Practice earthquake and tornado drills at home, school, and work. Commit a weekend to update telephone numbers and emergency supplies and to review your plan with everyone.

Preparedness Tip #10

A community working together during an emergency makes sense.

- Talk to your neighbors about how you can work together during an emergency.
- Find out if anyone has specialized equipment like a power generator, or expertise such as medical knowledge, that might help in a crisis.
- Decide who will check on elderly or disabled neighbors.
- Make back-up plans for children in case you can't get home in an emergency. Sharing plans and communicating in advance is a good strategy

Preparedness Tip #11

What if disaster strikes while you're at work? Do you know the emergency preparedness plan for your workplace? While many companies have been more alert and pro-active in preparing for disasters of all types since the September 11, 2001, attacks, a national survey indicates that many employees still don't know what their workplace plan is for major or minor disasters. If you don't know yours, make a point to ask. Know multiple ways to exit your building, participate in workplace evacuation drills, and consider keeping some emergency supplies at the office. Visit www.ready.gov and click on Ready Business for more information about business preparedness.

Preparedness Tip #12

You should keep enough supplies in your home to meet the needs of you and your family for at least three days. Build an emergency supply kit to take with you in an evacuation. The basics to stock in your portable kit include: water, food, battery-powered radio and flashlight with extra batteries, first aid supplies, change of clothing, blanket or sleeping bag, wrench or pliers, whistle, dust mask, plastic sheeting and duct tape, trash bags, map, a manual can opener for canned food and special items for infants, elderly, the sick, or people with disabilities. Keep these items in an easy to carry container such as a covered trash container, a large backpack, or a duffel bag.

Our elderly residents often are frail; and we need to get them out of harm's way as soon as possible. We can't expect them to do without food or fresh water. Situations that may be merely uncomfortable for their younger, healthier counterparts could put elderly individuals at risk.

My facilities have disaster preparedness plans in place. These include procedures for safe and effective evacuations and disaster drills. These facilities also have arrangements in place to transfer residents to another facility in the event of an emergency. This often means arranging with a facility outside of a risk area where staff and residents can find safe shelter during an emergency. They plan these things to the nth degree, and they operate on one main principle—the residents come first.

Of course, evacuation plans should address transportation and designate the transportation method to be used in case of evacuation. If this requires the use of loaned or rented vehicles, current signed agreements should be in place and expectations clearly defined for everyone involved.

There also are simply things facilities can do to plan for emergencies. These include compiling and maintaining a current, complete, and accurate list of emergency phone numbers and family/emergency contacts for residents.

As for pharmacies, we need to make sure that data is backed up.

If you have data, wholesalers are good about helping pharmacies set up again after a disaster. Assisted living facilities don't have emergency supplies of medications the way nursing facilities do. Yet, they still need to ensure that residents have the medications they need in the event of an emergency. They should work with pharmacies that serve their residents to put a plan in place to ensure access to medications in a disaster situation. ALC