

Disaster Preparedness for the Blind and Visually Impaired

By Gary Quackenbush (707-322-1882)

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There are several levels of "preparedness" that should be taken into consideration as you think about making definite plans to take care of yourself in a **natural** (flood, hurricane, earthquake, fire, disease etc.) **man-made** (nuclear, train/airplane crash etc.) or **technology** disaster (power grid goes down, water source fails, etc.).

You have probably heard that you should have three-days of water and food in reserve because public authorities may not be able to help you during the initial aftermath of a disastrous event - don't believe it. It could take weeks or even longer to get the help you need and you may be on your own for an extended period.

So what's the answer? As with triage in the medical world, as a disabled person (or anyone for that matter), there should be at least three levels of preparedness: **Immediate** needs (3-5 days); **Intermediate** (one week to one month) and **Long Term** (one month to several months or longer).

Why is this true? Look at the situations in the wake of major disasters: Katrina, Loma Prieta, the 1906 quake, hurricanes, the recent firestorm here in Northern California. There was no quick recovery and people were waiting for very long times to get what they needed and to completely get back to normal. Many are still waiting to return to the life they knew before such events.

I will discuss each of these three scenarios, but first let's look at a self-assessment checklist I found in a Midwest state's online preparedness website. It is important to have answers to the above. If you wish to explore these in greater detail, write or remember the number of the question and see me later, or we can talk more about each now.

Here are 21 key questions to answer:

1. Do you know where all the fire alarms and extinguishers are in the places where you are?
2. Can you activate the fire alarms?
3. Can you operate a fire extinguisher?
4. Do you know where the gas and water shut-off valves are at your home?

5. Have you marked the utility shut-off valves with florescent tape, tactile glue, large print or Braille labels?
6. Can you access them and use the proper tools to shut them off?
7. Do you have instructions or tools available so others can turn them off?
8. Do you have a standard telephone (does not run on electricity). Do you know where it is?
9. Do you know the location of ALL exits in places you frequent each day?
10. Have you evaluated your ability to use them?
11. Have you practiced using these exits?
12. Are there security lights along paths to exits (they auto activate in power failures)?
13. Have you thought about how you may be able to help others? - guide them in the dark.
14. If you are a calm person, have you considered how to calm others in an emergency?
15. Have you planned what to do if your service animal becomes confused or frightened?

16. If you navigate by sound cues, could you still get to an exit without them?

17. Are there signs with raised and Braille characters designating exits? If missing can you still get out? You can't count on such cues when alarms are blaring, or no electricity?

18. Can you read Braille signs?

19. If you wear contacts or glasses do you have clear goggles (for smoke, dust or fumes)?

20. Can you use two-way communication devices in elevators and areas of refuge?

21. Have you taught your support team how to serve as "sighted guides" if needed?

Create a Disaster Plan.

1. Discuss the types of disasters that are most likely, explain what to do in each case.
2. Pick at least two places to meet as rally points (outside your home, outside your neighborhood)
3. Ask an out-of-state friend or relative to be your "back up contact." Why? Because your primary support group members may not be able to call or reach you.
4. Assemble the Immediate Go Bag — Mark your supplies in large print, fluorescent tape or Braille.
5. Go Bag contents should include: Baby items, if needed, boxed or canned juices, high calorie protein bars, canned ready to eat food, cereal, crackers, granola bars, trail mix or nuts, a manual can opener, peanut butter, service animal pet items. Check and rotate food every six months, canned goods at least every 2-3 years.
The other two levels of stockpiling builds on the above and adds more supplies.
6. Bottled water (4-6 pints per person, per day, plus pet water)
7. Battery operated or crank operated radio

8. Flashlight and/or plastic emergency whistle
9. First aid kit
10. Toiletries and a change of clothing
11. Prescription medications, pain killers, prescription eyewear, hearing aids
12. Cane - essential for mobility, moving around objects
13. Work gloves, sturdy shoes
14. Safety glasses
15. Identification and important papers (photocopies) SSAN, health insurance, Medicare/Medicaid, photo ID, bank account, PIN numbers, contact telephone numbers,
16. Cash, coins, credit cards, check book and ATM card (ATMs won't work in a power outage)
17. Service animal food, water, (optional: bedding, cage, vet contact, favorite toy)
18. Get a bright yellow or orange vest, reflective markings, to wear
19. Get a poncho
20. Consider a canned heat or small propane stove (metal cup and metal pot)

21. Consider pre-packaged emergency kits. But remember, they are just the basics, and packages are almost always the same size and shape for everything.

Some Basic Considerations (in brief)

Know your alternate transit, pedestrian routes

Know your exits from buildings

Have a designated family contact

Create and implement a buddy system

Have a means of retaining information

Keep a copy of local emergency numbers

Practice emergency plans and procedures with family, friends, and a support network

Know how to shelter in place

Plan escape route(s) if fire spreads, water is rising, chemical spill hazard is growing (don't go home unless cleared by authorities)

Know at least two exits from every room

Check exits for walker, wheelchair, access

Keep all escape routes clear of objects for safe evacuation

Listed to radio, TV for news

Be sure to take service animal with you, even to a shelter