

# Disaster Planning Tips for Caregivers of the Elderly and People with Disabilities<sup>1</sup>

Carolyn Wilken and Martie Gillen<sup>2</sup>

News that a hurricane or tornado is on its way can cause anyone to worry. But if you are responsible for providing care for someone who is disabled or has special needs, chances are you face additional concerns. You and the person you care for may not be able to “jump and run” when the tornado sirens are sounded or the hurricane warning is issued. Planning ahead will give you a little peace of mind.

For caregivers, as for everyone else, it is important to have basic supplies available. The supply list available at the *American Red Cross* website (<http://www.redcross.org/>) serves as the model for many basic supply lists. Other sources provide information about special supplies for people with disabilities, for example *Disaster Planning Tips for Senior Adults* lists supplies that might be needed by people with disabilities and can be accessed online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy620>.

The purpose of this publication is to recommend specific strategies for you as the caregiver so you will be better prepared for any natural disaster that may come your way.

## Have a Plan

Although planning for a disaster can take time, having a plan in place can help you and the person you care for feel more secure. Good planning is all about details.

## Create a Disaster Team

Caregivers often feel they are “on their own” during normal times, and this feeling may intensify during times of disaster when people are hurrying to take care of their own family and property. People will be more than glad to help, but they will need to know exactly what you need and when you need it.

- Make plans for help with family, friends, neighbors or social service agencies.
- Include someone on your team who is able to lift and carry heavy objects such as wheelchairs or other medical equipment.
- Give at least one other person a key to the person’s home.
- Each team member should have the contact information for the others.
- Name a substitute caregiver in case you are unavailable or unable to provide care.

## Make Evacuation Plans

Evacuation can be complicated for caregivers. Develop an evacuation strategy with your “disaster team.” Consider the following:

- Where are the closest special needs emergency shelters? Remember you may not be able to reach the closest shelter, so know where the next closest one is located.

1. This document is FCS9216, one of a series of the Family, Youth and Community Sciences Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2005. Revised July 2012. Reviewed December 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Carolyn S. Wilken, former associate professor; and Martie Gillen, assistant professor and Family and Consumer Economics for Older Adults specialist, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county’s UF/IFAS Extension office.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.

Practice driving to both using different routes prior to storm warnings.

- What supplies must you take with you? In addition to the supplies you would normally need for an evacuation, think of those things you use as a caregiver every day. Make a check list of special caregiving items such as incontinence items, cleaning and sanitizing supplies, pill splitter or crusher, and thermometer. Secure a box or case to carry them in.
- How many people are needed to help make the move? These people should be part of your disaster network. Know how to reach them.
- Whom should you inform that you are evacuating? Let your neighbors and family members know, and if you live in any kind of “complex” let the administrators know that you have left.
- Keep your vehicle’s gas tank over  $\frac{3}{4}$  full at all times.

## Put It In Writing

Remember, in a disaster you may become separated from the person you provide care for. In case this happens, provide a written, detailed description of the person’s daily living requirements and medical needs (e.g., extra clothing and personal hygiene and/or incontinence products as well as medications). Provide very specific information about the person’s care, including tips for helping the care recipient remain calm or for helping them to calm themselves in times of stress or excitement.

Give copies of the list to the members of your caregiving team and place a copy where it can be easily found. Many people put this kind of information on a **boldly written note securely taped to the front of the refrigerator**. Emergency personnel know to look there and chances are good that the refrigerator will stay in place.

In addition, create an hour by hour description of a typical 24 hour day, include:

- How the care recipient spends his or her time.
- What is needed at each point in time.
- How to provide for those needs.
- Where the supplies are used to meet those needs.

If there are caregiving tasks that occur every other day, or on a weekly basis, create a weekly calendar to describe those care needs.

Describe in detail how to help the care recipient handle stress and trauma:

- Does talking or singing help? Is there a special story or song?
- What possessions bring comfort (blanket, stuffed animal, etc.)? Where can they be found?
- When is medication needed to help calm the care recipient?
- Who is the care recipient most comfortable with if you are unavailable? How can they be contacted?

## Waiting for the Storm

### Tornados

When a tornado is approaching there is little time to prepare, and little time to worry. Put your plan into action immediately.

### Hurricanes

When a hurricane is approaching there is time to get ready, and plenty of time to worry. When caring for someone with a disability who depends on a strict routine to help remain calm, it is important to maintain as much of your daily routine as possible:

- Keep normal sleeping and meal schedules.
- Minimize talk about the status of the hurricane.
- If you are unable to go out as normal, create activities at home to pass the time.
- Limit watching the news and weather forecasts to a specific time of day rather than keeping the television or radio turned on all day long.

## Further Assistance

If you have questions about how to create your own disaster plan contact the local Red Cross office or the people who handle emergency management in your community. They can help you find local services and provide you with the details you need to complete your plan.

## Helpful Websites

For more detailed information about caring for someone with a disability during a disaster see the following websites.

Wilken, Carolyn. *Preparing for a Disaster: Strategies for Older Adults*. EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy750>

Wilken, Carolyn. *Disaster Planning Tips for Senior Adults*. EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy620>

Disaster Planning and Response for Persons with Disabilities (State of Florida). <http://www.apd.myflorida.com/customers/disaster/>

ReadyAmerica.gov. "Get a Kit: Items for Special Needs." <http://www.ready.gov/document/preparing-makes-sense-people-disabilities-and-special-needs>

Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities (Federal Emergency Management Agency) <http://www.fema.gov/news-release/accommodating-people-disabilities-disasters-reference-guide-federal-law> [4 September 2012].

American Red Cross. <http://www.redcross.org>