



# Protecting Special Needs Populations during a Pandemic

During a pandemic, supply chains may break down, access to outpatient medical treatments may be limited and hospitals likely will reach full capacity quickly. For Ohioans with physical, medical or mental disabilities, emergencies present unique challenges.

## **SPECIAL NEEDS PLANNING FOR ORGANIZATIONS**

Organizations working with special needs populations should plan now to continue providing supplies and services during a pandemic. Protecting vulnerable special needs populations during a pandemic requires careful planning.

A first step in planning for special needs populations during a pandemic is to identify those who may receive services or supplies through your organization. People with disabilities have differing capabilities and no one individual or organization can represent the needs of all people with special needs. That's why it is important to carefully identify the special needs populations your organization may serve.

Second, work with local disability organizations to identify larger groups or clusters of people with disabilities. For example, does your organization serve a school with a large population of disabled students, a senior housing development or an apartment complex with large numbers of residents with disabilities? Identifying clusters will streamline the planning process.

Finally, prepare a voluntary special needs registry if you do not yet have one for your organization. A registry is a listing of people who meet specified criteria who may need assistance during a potential pandemic.

A registry can be used in two ways. The first is to survey the needs of the individuals listed in the registry. The second is to use it to alert people with disabilities of an emergency and assist officials in providing emergency services. A registry for your organization can be shared with local authorities to assist in evacuation and other emergencies services should the need arise. Businesses may be aware of special needs of employees, but nonprofit and faith-based organizations may need to do more work to identify special needs people they work with.

When developing a special needs registry your organization should consider:

- Do you have a plan to keep the registry up to date? An out-of-date registry may be a hindrance if people no longer live or work where the registry says they do.
- What will be the criteria for inclusion in the registry? Consider the criteria and who will make eligibility determinations.
- What safeguards will be in place to protect registrants' privacy? Some people may not wish to be identified as having a disability. Guidelines should be developed to determine when and with whom the information can be shared.

Developing a special needs registry specific to the disabled people your organization serves can be helpful to identify gaps in resources and planning.

## **SPECIAL NEEDS PLANNING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Individual preparedness can also help keep people with disabilities safe during an emergency. Planning ahead provides the best protection when disaster strikes. In preparing for a pandemic, it is best to consider planning for all potential emergency situations.

First, create a personal support network, or if you know someone who has special needs, offer to be a part of their network. A personal support network can be made of trusted people who can provide assistance if needed. If you know someone with special needs, ask what you can do to help them through an emergency. It is important to not count on just one support person. Try to include a minimum of three people for each location where you regularly spend a lot of time such as home, school or work.

Second, complete a personal assessment. Make a list of personal needs and resources for meeting them in a disaster environment. For planning purposes, it's best to base your plan on your lowest anticipated level of functioning.

Use the following questions to help you or someone you know complete a personal assessment:

### **DAILY LIVING**

- Personal Care – Do you need assistance with personal care or use adaptive equipment to help you get dressed?
- Personal Care Equipment – Do you require a shower chair, tub-transfer bench or other equipment?
- Adaptive Feeding Devices – Do you require special utensils to help you prepare or eat food independently?
- Medications – Do you have a listing and supply of all medications?
- Electricity-dependent Equipment – Do you have a safe backup power supply for equipment that runs on electricity? How long will it last?

### **GETTING AROUND**

- Disaster Debris – How will you cope with debris in your home or along planned escape routes?
- Transportation – Do you need a specially equipped vehicle or accessible transportation?
- Errands – Do you have extra groceries, medication and medical supplies if your caregiver is unable to reach you?

### **EVACUATING**

- Building Evacuation – Will you need help to evacuate your home or office?
- Building Exits – Are there alternate exits such as stairs, windows or ramps you can use if elevators are shut down in an emergency?
- Getting Help – How will you get help if fire alarms with sprinklers ruin electronic devices?
- Mobility Aids/Ramp Access – What can you do if you can't find your mobility aids? What will you do if your ramps are shaken loose or become separated from the building?
- Service Animals/Pets – Will you be able to care for your animal? Do you have someone designated to care for your animal should you be unable to? Do you have appropriate licenses for your service animal so you will be permitted to keep it with you or choose to use an emergency public shelter?

The following are a few more items to consider before a disaster: store backup equipment at your neighbor's home, school or workplace; have a manual wheelchair if you use an electric scooter; transferring methods; teach those who may assist you to operate necessary equipment and if you are vision impaired, deaf or hard of hearing; plan ahead for someone to convey emergency information if you are unable to use TV or radio.

Be sure to discuss emergency plans with family, friends, personal care attendants and anyone else in your support network.