

# Emergency Preparedness

## How to create and implement an emergency preparedness plan

By Suzanne F. McNeely



As the New Year has rolled around, people begin to look forward to what the year will bring and how they can best be prepared for what is to come. Many hope to continue to have good health, be surrounded by friends and family and to have a good, quality life. In preparing for the upcoming year, one of the most important and loving things you can do for yourself or an aging loved one is to create and implement an emergency preparedness plan.

Having an emergency preparedness plan will lend peace of mind and bring organization to what can be a chaotic situation. Remember that older adults can be disproportionately affected by crisis. Physical impairments, medical and dietary needs, lack of transportation and isolation can make it harder to be safe, and to recover from a hazardous situation. Advanced preparation makes it far more likely that you will be able to take appropriate action before, during, and after an emergency.

**What can you do to prepare now?** There are several things you can do ahead of time to get ready to respond to the kinds of events that a natural disaster (e.g., winter storms, flooding, power outages) or medical emergency (e.g., falls, heart failure, pneumonia) might trigger.

Here are a few suggestions:

**Organize Important Documents.** Encourage your loved one to organize important documents and medical information. Offer your help. It's critical that this be done while your loved one is medically and mentally capable of participating in this process. According to the American Red Cross, important documentation includes:

- Medicare card • Social Security card
- All health insurance ID cards
- Copy of birth certificate

- Names, information. Laminate the list and put it in an obvious place (e.g., the refrigerator door, by the phone, in the top drawer of a desk, etc.) A group of seniors with the American Red Cross put together the following suggestions for a reference sheet:
- Name, address, telephone number, birth date, social security number, and medical insurance information
- Name and contact information for primary caregiver and closest relatives.
- Primary physician's name and contact information.
- List of health conditions (i.e. diabetes, high blood pressure, etc.)
- A list of all medications and dosages.
- Name/phone number of pharmacy.
- Specialist medical personnel and their contact information (i.e. cardiologist, neurologist).
- A living will and/or a durable power of attorney.
- Include the current date on this document.

**Create a Support Network.** If you anticipate your loved one will need assistance during a disaster, talk to family, friends and others who will be part of a personal support network.

- Write down and share each aspect of your emergency plan with everyone in the support network.
- Decide on a "out of area" contact person who can take and disseminate information as needed during a disaster in the event local communications are interrupted. Prominently display the phone number and/or email phone numbers, and addresses of doctor(s).  
Note: If your loved one wants you to be able to discuss medical issues with a doctor, ask them to complete privacy release forms. Keep them on file with each doctor's office.
- List of current medications and the name/phone number of the corresponding pharmacy and prescribing physician.
- List of allergies to food or medications
- Will, Living Will, and Powers of Attorney: ask if you may make copies to retain. If these documents don't exist, encourage your loved one to prepare them.
- Copies of insurance policies and premium payment schedules, including life insurance and long-term care insurance.
- Information about finances including the name and contact information for the tax preparer or accountant.

**Create a Laminated Reference Sheet.** It is a good idea for every older

adult to have a complete list of emergency telephone numbers and address in your plan.

- Make sure everyone knows the plan for evacuation and where to go in case of a disaster.
- Make sure that someone in your local network has an extra key to your loved one's home.
- Teach those who will help you, how to use any lifesaving equipment, administer medicine in case of an emergency, etc.
- Know how to get in contact with service agencies you may need, such as the Area Agencies on Aging and the American Red Cross.

The most important part of planning for crisis is to keep lines of communication open. Talk frequently to your aging loved one about your disaster/crisis plan. Make sure they are comfortable with the plan, know where documents are and are active participants in making the plan. Planning ahead will go a long way in preparing for a positive outcome for your loved one and add an extra layer of peace of mind for the New Year.

*About the Author: Suzanne McNeely, MSW, RG, CCF, is president and founder of Senior Planning Services (SPS) in Santa Barbara, CA. She began SPS in 1989 after many years of working in social services and hospital administration. Suzanne designed SPS to help advocate and provide guidance in all aspects of daily life for the elderly, including psychological, physical, financial and legal issues. She can be reached at [smcneely@seniorplanningservices.com](mailto:smcneely@seniorplanningservices.com).*