

Information for this review came from the interactive Research Information on Independent Living (RIIL) database at [www.GetRIIL.org](http://www.GetRIIL.org), which contains research summaries related to inde-

pendent living with disabilities. A special effort has been made to include information that independent readers in the field said they wanted, namely topics regarding accessible, affordable housing, effective advocacy for rural areas, effective transition from schools and nursing homes, accessible, affordable transportation, reaching underserved populations, policies that impede independent living, rural health care services, and Medicaid/Medicare regulations for durable equipment.

RIIL is a joint effort of the Research and Training Center on Independent Living at the University of Kansas and the Independent Living Research Utilization (ILRU) Program of TIRR.

Look up studies in



[www.GetRIIL.org](http://www.GetRIIL.org)

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# Disaster Preparation

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*Risk management relies on the motto "prepare for the worst and hope for the best."*

Natural and man-made disasters put everyone to the test.

People with disabilities, according to a 1989 U.S. Geological Survey study, tend to do well with this particular test. This study and additional research have found that people with physical disabilities have a psychological advantage over others, since they have to deal with difficult physical limitations every day and have a head start on negotiating the environment.

However, people with disabilities may have less fortune accessing emergency medical supplies and shelter. Preparation in advance can provide improved disaster relief.

Emergency agencies have said people with disabilities can help themselves by registering disability needs with emergency agencies, reading emergency preparation publications, establishing a self-help network, and assuming personal responsibility. People with disabilities also can keep emergency supplies such as charged batteries, flashlights, emergency food and water, and manual can opener in their homes.

Another way to prepare is to look for household items that can move, fall, break, or cause a fire and have two evacuation routes planned in case one proves unavailable.

Also know the location and availability of another facility for life-sustaining equipment such as a dialysis machine in case the usual facility has closed.

Even if a person is self-sufficient, a disaster can cause that person to need the help of others. Considerations to keep in mind about people with disabilities, include:

**"For disabled individuals, then, lack of preparedness could reflect an expectation that others will take care of them, or it could indicate an exaggerated sense of independence and an unwillingness to rely on anyone else for anything.**

**Or, on the other hand, it could just be part of the universal human tendency to avoid thinking about personal dangers."**

Source: Lathrop, D (1994, November). *Disaster! Mainstream.*

- They may need more time than expected to make preparations for leaving their home and might be reluctant to leave familiar settings if asked by a stranger.
  - Guide dogs may be confused in a disaster.
- The fear of being dropped when carried or transferred can be a real concern, so knowledge of proper lifting methods is crucial
  - Respiratory illnesses can be aggravated by stress.
- Many conditions need continual medication, and person may not be able to communicate the information

Companies, too, should plan for disaster. The Americans With Disabilities Act requires employers to include people with disabilities in all policies and procedures, including disaster plans.

For example, disaster facilities and services should be physically accessible for people with disabilities and people who became disabled after the disaster. In an emergency situation such as a fire, electrical power usually shuts off and elevator shafts get depleted of oxygen fast or can fill with smoke.

People with mobility disabilities and who use wheelchairs have to wait for assistance if they are unable to descend the steps. The Americans With Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines requires that a safe, fire-protected waiting area be at or near inaccessible exits for people who must remain until they get assistance to evacuate the building. These areas should also be large enough for two wheelchair users to wait outside the path of stair travel.

Controlled descent chairs with a friction braking system can be placed in exit stairs, too, for emergencies.

Once planned, emergency procedures should be distributed in necessary formats so that all employees are aware of them.

Later payoffs can result by thinking now of disasters to come.

— *Cindy Higgins, The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, The University of Kansas. This project funded by National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research grant #H133A980048.*

**See [http://rtcll.org/disaster\\_grant.htm](http://rtcll.org/disaster_grant.htm) for information on a national model of disaster preparedness and emergency response for people with mobility disabilities.**