

Emergency Preparedness for Older Pennsylvanians

Op-ed by Secretary of Aging Teresa Osborne

September is National Preparedness Month and this year's theme is, *"Disasters Don't Plan Ahead. You Can."* Recognizing that we are in the immediate aftermath of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, disasters like these serve as a reminder that each of us must be prepared for emergencies that can easily affect us where we live, work, or visit.

Being prepared for the next potential emergency is a top priority for the Wolf Administration. As such, the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA) and the Department of Aging have been engaged in conversations about emergency preparedness and Pennsylvania's older population. A recent survey conducted by PEMA revealed that only 26% of Pennsylvanians age 65 and older have a plan in place for when disaster strikes. This sobering statistic tells us that we all have friends, family, neighbors, and consumers who have no plan for how to act when a disaster is imminent, don't know how to respond after one has struck, and may not know how to communicate if they need assistance.

Older Pennsylvanians have some of the same needs as the general population during a human-made or natural disaster. However, for older adults and persons with disabilities, they may also have a wider variety of functional limitations and some additional challenges to consider, including medical equipment, accessibility and transportation issues, and access to prescription medications. Approximately half of those over age 65 have two or more chronic health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, and Alzheimer's disease. These conditions increase a person's vulnerability during periods of time without food, water, shelter, and adequate rest. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, nearly one-third of older adults reside outside of a nursing home or hospital setting. This reality makes the creation and maintenance of a support network particularly important.

Because emergencies and disasters strike quickly, you might be forced to evacuate your neighborhood or be prepared to be confined to your home. While first responders and relief workers will be quickly on the scene, they may not be able to reach everyone immediately, meaning that help may arrive in hours or even days depending on the extent of damage. What would you do if your basic services: water, gas, electricity, or communications, were cut off? Even if you have physical limitations, you can still learn how to protect yourself and cope with disaster by planning in advance and by working with those in your support network: your family, neighbors, friends, and caregivers, as well as your local responders as a team.

During September, the month dedicated to emergency preparedness, I encourage all older Pennsylvanians and their families to be informed, prepared, involved and ready, and invite you to take these easy steps:

1. Visit www.ready.PA.gov to take the "Ready PA Preparedness Pledge"
2. Download the "Get Ready Now" pocket guide, a 3-step guide on emergency preparedness for older adults. *To access the guide, go to www.aging.pa.gov, hover your mouse over the "Publications & Reports" dropdown, then click on "Emergency Preparedness" (Direct link: www.aging.pa.gov/publications/documents/Seniors.pdf)*

3. Call your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA), which is poised to participate on every level of emergency preparedness planning, and meet the needs of the communities they serve in times of crisis. Find your local AAA at www.aging.pa.gov/AAA