

# Including Family Caregivers in Emergency Response Planning and Preparedness

## Introduction

An estimated 63 million Americans provide care for an older adult or someone living with illness or disability.<sup>1</sup> Family caregivers provide a wide range of services, such as transportation, food preparation, housekeeping and personal care, enabling care recipients to live at home or in the setting of their choice with dignity and independence. Without supportive services, nearly 62 percent of caregivers have suggested that the individual they care for would be living in a nursing home.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there are at least 2.4 million children being raised by grandparents or other relative caregivers, serving as a safety net and providing care when children's parents are unable.<sup>3</sup>

This Action Guide is part of a series to help Aging Network organizations develop innovative caregiver services and supports that meet the needs of a growing population of caregivers.

A **family caregiver** is an adult family member or other individual who has a significant relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance to, an individual with a chronic or other health condition, disability or functional limitation. This includes any grandparent or relative adult who has primary responsibility for grandchildren or other children who cannot remain with their parents.<sup>4</sup>

## Caregiving and Emergency Preparedness

Caregivers have unique needs when it comes to preparing, navigating and recovering from disasters. Caregivers can be responsible for providing all types of care, from activities of daily living to emotional support, which are vital, particularly when experiencing an emergency or community disaster. Caregivers also ensure continuity of care for their loved one when emergency services might be delayed or unavailable due to uncontrollable events. Given their critical role, it is important that efforts for emergency response and preparedness include considerations for family caregivers.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), **emergency response** is the capability to save lives, protect property and environment and meet basic needs after an incident has occurred. FEMA also defines **emergency preparedness** as the continuous cycle of planning, organizing, training, equipping, exercising, evaluating and taking corrective action to ensure effective coordination during incident response.

In 2023, FEMA responded to more than 100 disasters and those impacted, including older adults and their caregivers, received more than \$1.3 billion to jumpstart their recovery. Public recognition of the need to protect the health of older adults during disasters grew following the adverse physical and mental health outcomes that older

adults experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. During disasters and public health emergencies, older adults can experience exacerbations of chronic diseases and behavioral health issues.<sup>5</sup>

According to a study by the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers (RCI) and Duke University School of Medicine, current literature focused on natural disasters lacks the voice and experience of caregivers. This study also verified that while caregivers undertook similar preparedness efforts as non-caregiving peers, caregivers faced unique considerations to preparedness for themselves and those they care for. These unique considerations include advance medical planning to obtain medications and ensure power for medical devices, logistical planning for possible evacuation and understanding of the significant psychological stress and anxiety during all phases of the disaster. This includes managing the caregiver's stress and anxiety but also managing the stress and anxiety of those for whom they care.<sup>6</sup>

The Aging and Disability Networks play an important role in helping to engage caregivers in critical conversations around emergency response planning and preparedness as well as connecting caregivers with available emergency and disaster preparedness programs and resources.

## Action Steps

### 1. Explore innovative emergency response and preparedness program examples and resources.

**Resource Name:** Disaster Preparedness Guide for Caregivers

**Resource Description:** FEMA and RCI created the *Disaster Preparedness Guide for Caregivers* to help caregivers navigate unique challenges that may arise during disasters. Taking three essential steps—assessing needs, engaging a support network and creating a plan—can help caregivers feel more prepared and in control when disaster strikes.

**Learn More:**

- [Disaster Preparedness Guide for Caregivers](#)
- [Rosalynn Carter Emergency Preparedness](#)

**Resource Name:** Inclusive Preparedness Resources: Disaster Safety for People With Disabilities

**Program Description:** Individuals with mobility, hearing, learning or visual impairments may have specific needs that have to be addressed in order to respond to an emergency. Caregivers of individuals with disabilities can become “Red Cross Ready” for any urgent situation, which means assembling a [survival kit](#), making an emergency plan and [staying informed](#). Additionally, caregivers may benefit from tips about managing communications, equipment, service animals, pets and home hazards.

**Learn More:** [Disaster Safety for People with Disabilities Being Prepared Means Planning Ahead](#)

**Program Name:** Older Adult and Disability Sector Support Team

**Organization:** San Diego Area Agency on Aging

**Program Description:** County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Aging & Independence Services, worked with the County Emergency Operations Center and Public Health Services departments to establish the Older Adult and Disability Sector Support Team—a replicable structure for emergency response and outreach to the Aging and Disability Networks. The support team became an integral part of the county's emergency response, disseminating timely information to older adults and their caregivers, providing technical support to agencies to help interpret public health guidance, conducting needs assessments, creating resources and facilitating vaccine access for homebound and low-income older adults and their caregivers. This model will be used for future public health and emergency response efforts.

**Learn More:** [San Diego County Aging & Independence Services](#)

**Program Name:** Fairfax Caregiver Alert Notifications

**Organization:** Fairfax Area Agency on Aging

**Program Description:** Caregiver Alert Notifications enable family caregivers to remain informed, obtain education and easily access programs and services offered by Fairfax Area Agency on Aging and other county departments via text messages, emails and/or voice communication. Caregivers subscribe to the AAA/Caregivers option through Fairfax Office of Emergency Management's Fairfax Alerts System and receive weekly notifications with information about workshops, webinars, support groups and other supportive services. Caregivers that sign up can also choose to receive other emergency alerts through the system.

**Learn More:** [Fairfax County Family Caregiver Support Programs](#)

**Program Name:** EmPowerment: Emergency Readiness for Older Adults

**Organization:** Arlington Agency on Aging

**Program Description:** The EmPowerment program was developed to hear from older adults and their caregivers about their needs and concerns related to emergency preparedness and to assist them in planning for the unexpected. Through a collaboration with the Office of Emergency Management, local fire departments, the American Red Cross and the Animal Welfare League, residents met with representatives from their local fire department; participated in interactive activities; and received a Red Cross Ready kit with emergency drinking water, flashlight, poncho, food rations, whistle, blanket and other supplies. An onsite interpreter provided information in Spanish for residents who required translation.

**Learn More:** [Arlington Virginia Area Agency on Aging](#)

## 2. Collaborate with the local emergency management office.

- Connect with your emergency management office about local emergency preparedness coalitions or volunteer groups. You can look up the local office near you using [FEMA's location search tool](#).
  - Request a meeting with your local emergency management office to network and share information.
  - Learn about emergency plans or continuity of operation plans and how they plan to support caregivers, older adults and people with disabilities during an emergency. Discuss the essential role of caregivers in emergencies.
  - Bring key resources such as [ACL's Emergency Preparedness for the Aging Services Network](#).

## 3. Provide hands-on and practical resources and guides to caregivers.

- Have caregivers start with creating a plan for themselves and the people they care for. Examples can be found in the [Disaster Preparedness Guide for Caregivers](#).
- Make sure caregivers know how to contact the emergency management office or official disaster volunteer organization.
- Have caregivers set up time with disaster offices to tour shelters to which family caregivers and care recipients might evacuate.
- Caregivers should view preparedness as an ongoing process to be revisited frequently to ensure that changing needs are identified addressed.
- Emergency preparedness should be seen as an essential part of an intake or renewal process for resources and services. Having a plan for disasters should be considered as essential as caregivers having a plan for hospitalization or home healthcare.

## 4. Engage in broader emergency planning discussions across your state.

- Examine opportunities for broader participation in emergency planning efforts. Prepare by reviewing state-level recommendations from the [National Advisory Committee on Seniors and Disasters](#), including:
  - Advance the dissemination of accessible, available and usable emergency preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation information and communication support services. Preparedness

information and resources should be found quickly and be easily accessible by all members of the community.

- Expand trained community disaster partners. Proper training of community partners can lead to more community capacity in all phases of a disaster. Training should be offered through traditional and Force-Multiplier Disaster Community Partners, such as faith-based and parks and recreation departments.

## **Conclusion**

Aging and Disability Networks providers can take simple and easy steps toward preparing family caregivers for disasters. By including family caregivers in disaster preparedness and response, providers can help communities prepare and recover in a way that will increase the health and resiliency of family caregivers and care recipients.

## **Additional Resources**

- [Administration for Community Living \(ACL\)–National Family Caregiver Support Program](#)
- [ACL–National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#)
- [ACL–Emergency Preparedness](#)
- [American Red Cross–Safe and Well](#)
- [California Department of Aging–Emergency Preparedness Guide: A Guide for Older Adults, Individuals With Disabilities, and People With Access and Functional Needs](#)
- [Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program–Emergency Preparedness and Response](#)
- [National Academy for State Health Policy–Supporting Family Caregivers: A Roadmap for States](#)
- [National Council on Aging:](#)
  - [Disaster Assistance](#)
  - [4 Free Tools to Help Caregivers Prepare for Emergencies](#)
- [NACCHO–Capacity Building Toolkit for Including Aging & Disability Networks in Emergency Planning](#)
- [National Mass Care Strategy](#)
- [OSHA–Evacuation Plans and Procedures](#)
- [RCI–Disaster Preparedness Guide for Caregivers](#)
- [Virginia Inclusive Emergency Management Initiative–My Emergency Plan](#)

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## References

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- <sup>1</sup> AARP and NAC (2025). [Caregiving in the U.S. Report 2025](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Administration for Community Living (2014). [National Family Caregiver Support Program](#).
- <sup>3</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021–2023). Accessed September 2024. [Kids Count Data Center: Children in Kinship Care in the United States](#).
- <sup>4</sup> Administration for Community Living (2022). [National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#).
- <sup>5</sup> National Advisory Committee on Seniors and Disasters (NACSD) (2023). [Recommendations From the National Advisory Committee on Seniors and Disasters](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Boucher, N. A., et. al. (2022). [Caregiving in U.S. Gulf States During Natural Disasters and COVID-19–PMC](#).

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