

Build Disability-Inclusive Plans

Emergencies do not affect everyone in the same way.

People with disabilities may face additional barriers during disasters, from receiving alerts to evacuating safely or managing medical needs during outages. Disability-inclusive emergency planning helps ensure that everyone has the information, tools and support needed to stay safe before, during and after a crisis.

IDENTIFY NEEDS AND REDUCE BARRIERS

Effective planning starts with recognizing individual needs. Disabilities may be physical, sensory, cognitive, intellectual, mental health-related or chronic and may not always be visible. Consider how an emergency could affect mobility, communication, decision-making or access to medications and medical devices.

Think through likely scenarios. How would you evacuate if elevators were unavailable? How would you receive alerts if power or internet access were lost? Would you be able to shelter in place safely without electricity, running water or climate control? Identifying these challenges in advance allows time to put solutions in place.

Create written emergency plans that are clear, accessible and easy to update. Using plain language, large print or visual formats can make plans easier



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to understand and share with caregivers or responders.

PREPARE ADAPTIVE EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES

Customize emergency kits to include disability-related supplies. This may include extra batteries for hearing aids or mobility devices, backup chargers, medical supplies, assistive communication tools, glasses or mobility aids. If you rely on powered medical equipment, plan for extended power outages with battery backups or access to generators.

Medications deserve special attention. Keep an up-to-date

list of prescriptions, dosages and providers, along with extra refills when possible. Store copies of important medical documents in physical and digital formats.

Identify accessible evacuation routes and transportation options in advance. If you use paratransit services or need assistance during evacuation, find out how those services operate during emergencies and what alternatives may be available.

BUILD SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND SHARE PLANS

No one should plan alone. Support networks are a corner-

stone of disability-inclusive preparedness. Identify trusted people who can help check in, provide transportation, communicate information or assist with daily needs during an emergency. Share your emergency plan with them and review it together.

Community connections matter as well. Registering with local emergency management agencies, utility providers or special needs registries can help responders identify where assistance may be required during disasters. These programs vary by location, but they can improve response coordination.

Practice your plan when

possible. Walk through evacuation routes, test backup equipment and review communication methods. Revisit plans regularly, especially when health needs, living situations or support networks change.

Inclusive emergency planning strengthens entire communities. When adaptive strategies, appropriate equipment and strong support systems are in place, people with disabilities are better positioned to stay safe and recover more quickly.

Preparing with inclusion in mind ensures that emergency readiness truly serves everyone.

Scammers Offer Fake Quick Relief

In the aftermath of a disaster, communities often see an outpouring of help. Unfortunately, they can also see an influx of scams.

As families focus on safety, repairs and recovery, criminals may try to take advantage of confusion and urgency.

Consumer protection experts say awareness is one of the best defenses. Knowing how common scams work can help residents protect their money and personal information during a vulnerable time.

WATCH FOR RED FLAGS

After storms, fires or floods, reputable contractors are often in high demand. That can create openings for dishonest operators who go door to door offering quick repairs.

Warning signs include asking for large upfront payments, pressuring homeowners to sign contracts immediately or refusing to provide written estimates. Some scammers claim they have “leftover materials” from a nearby job or offer deep discounts for quick decisions.

The Federal Trade Commission advises checking licenses, insurance and references before hiring. Homeowners can verify whether a contractor is registered in their state. Experts recommend avoiding cash payments and never paying in full before work is



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completed. Written contracts that spell out costs, timelines and responsibilities offer added protection.

BE CAUTIOUS WITH CHARITIES

Disasters often prompt generous giving, but fake charities

sometimes appear alongside legitimate ones. Scammers may use names that sound similar to well-known organizations or create emotional appeals on social media, email or text. Before donating, consumers can research charities through watchdog groups

or give directly through an organization’s official website. The American Red Cross and other established groups typically list clear ways to donate on their sites.

Requests for payment through gift cards, wire transfers or cryptocurrency can be

red flags. Legitimate charities generally offer secure, traceable payment options and provide information about how funds will be used.

PROTECT PERSONAL INFORMATION

Disasters can disrupt mail service, displace families and create paperwork challenges, which can increase the risk of identity theft. Lost documents, exposed mailboxes or online forms requesting aid can all present opportunities for fraud.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency notes official disaster assistance applications do not require fees. Survivors should be cautious about sharing Social Security numbers, banking details or insurance information unless they are certain they are dealing with a legitimate source.

Monitoring bank and credit card statements for unusual activity can help catch problems early. Some residents choose to place fraud alerts on their credit files after major disasters.

Recovering from a disaster is hard enough without financial setbacks. By slowing down, verifying sources and keeping records, families can reduce their risk. Officials emphasize a simple rule: if an offer or request feels rushed or too good to be true, it probably is. Taking a few extra minutes to check credentials can protect both finances and peace of mind during recovery.

Protect Mental Health

Disasters disrupt daily life in visible ways, but their less obvious effects can linger long after power is restored and the debris is cleared.

Stress, anxiety and grief are common reactions before, during and after emergencies. Preparing for mental health needs is as important as stocking supplies, and it can help you recover more fully when circumstances are overwhelming.

RECOGNIZE STRESS AND TRAUMA RESPONSES

During a crisis, your body and brain shift into survival mode. Short-term reactions such as trouble sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches or stomach issues are common. After the immediate danger passes, some people feel emotionally numb, unusually sad or constantly on edge. Others replay events in their minds or avoid reminders of what happened.

These responses are normal, especially after events involving displacement, injury or loss. Children may show stress differently, including changes in behavior, clinginess, regression or new fears. Older adults and people with prior mental health conditions may be more vulnerable to prolonged effects.



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Pay attention to changes that last more than a few weeks or interfere with daily functioning. Persistent anxiety, panic attacks, withdrawal from others, substance misuse or feelings of hopelessness may signal the need for additional support.

USE SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO MANAGE STRESS

Small, practical steps can help stabilize emotions during uncertain times. Maintaining routines, even in simplified form, provides a sense of control. Try to eat regular meals,

rest when possible and move your body, even if it's just stretching or a short walk.

Limit exposure to constant news updates and social media, which can intensify anxiety. Choose specific times to check for updates from reliable sources. Practice grounding techniques such as slow breathing, focusing on physical sensations or naming things you can see and hear around you.

Staying connected matters. Reach out to family, friends or neighbors to share information and offer mutual support.

Helping others, when safe to do so, can reduce feelings of helplessness.

KNOW WHEN AND WHERE TO SEEK HELP

Planning ahead for mental health resources can make it easier to act when stress escalates. Keep a list of local crisis lines, counseling centers and telehealth providers with your emergency documents. Many communities activate disaster mental health services after major events, offering free or low-cost counseling, support groups or outreach services.

If you or someone in your household is in immediate emotional distress or danger, emergency services and crisis hotlines can provide assistance. Schools, faith-based organizations and community centers often serve as hubs for emotional support following disasters.

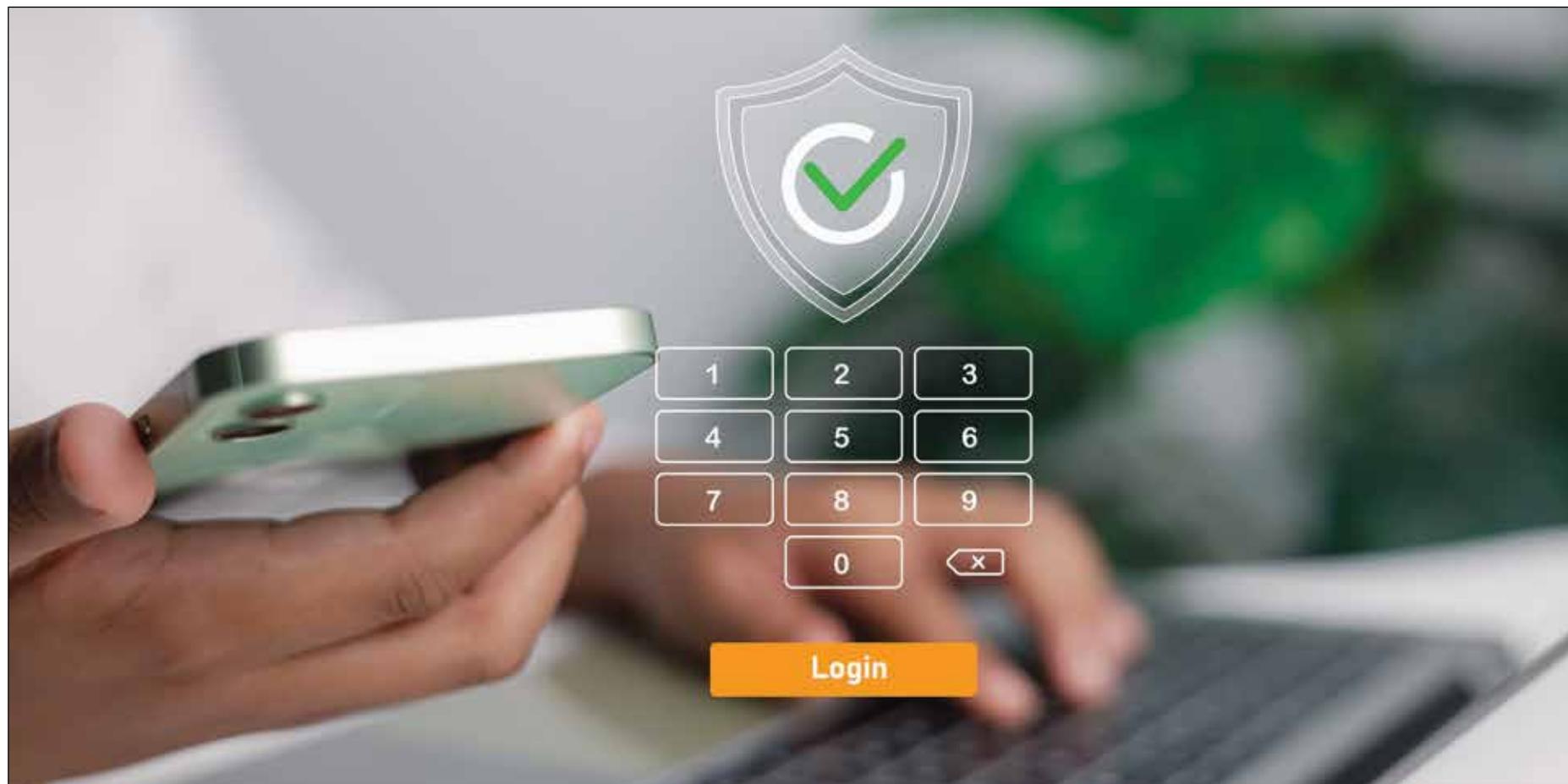
Recovery is not a straight line. Emotional reactions may resurface months later, especially around anniversaries or during rebuilding. Giving yourself permission to seek help is part of preparedness, not a sign of weakness.

Prepare for Cyber Emergencies

When disasters disrupt daily life, cybercriminals often move quickly to exploit confusion, fear and urgent needs.

Power outages, damaged infrastructure and displaced residents create ideal conditions for scams, identity theft and data loss. Preparing for cyber emergencies is now an important part of overall emergency readiness.

Protecting digital information before a disaster and knowing how to stay safe afterward can prevent financial loss and long-term stress during recovery.



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PROTECT YOUR DATA BEFORE DISASTER HITS

Start by securing the digital information you rely on most. Back up important files such as insurance documents, medical records, tax returns and property records. Use at least two backup methods — a secure cloud service and an external hard drive stored in a waterproof, fire-resistant container.

Use strong, unique passwords for banking, email and social media accounts, and consider a reputable password manager to keep track of them. Enable multifactor authentication whenever possible, especially for financial and cloud-based accounts.

Update devices regularly. Operating system and

software updates often include security patches that protect against known vulnerabilities. Set phones, tablets and computers to update automatically so they remain protected even during busy or stressful periods.

SECURE DEVICES DURING POWER AND INTERNET OUTAGES

Extended outages increase digital risk. When using public Wi-Fi at shelters, hotels or cafés, avoid accessing sensitive accounts such as online banking or medical portals. Public networks can be insecure and may expose personal data to hackers.

Keep devices physically secure. Disasters often involve

crowded or unfamiliar spaces where phones and laptops can be lost or stolen. Use device passcodes, screen locks and remote tracking features that allow you to erase data if a device goes missing.

Portable chargers and battery backups help maintain access to essential information without relying on unfamiliar or unsafe charging stations.

WATCH FOR POST-DISASTER SCAMS

Scammers frequently impersonate government agencies, insurance companies, charities and contractors following disasters. Phishing emails, text messages and phone calls may claim

immediate action is required to receive aid or avoid losing benefits.

Be cautious of unsolicited messages asking for personal information, payment or login credentials. Legitimate organizations do not demand sensitive details through email or text. Avoid clicking links in messages unless you independently verify the source by visiting official websites or contacting organizations directly.

Fake charities often emerge after disasters. Before donating, research organizations using trusted charity watchdog resources. Avoid pressure tactics and requests for payment via gift cards, cryptocurrency or wire transfers.

DURING RECOVERY

Monitor bank accounts and credit cards closely after a disaster. Set up account alerts to flag unusual activity. Consider placing a fraud alert or credit freeze on credit reports if personal information may have been exposed. Keep a record of all communications related to disaster assistance, repairs and insurance claims. Organized documentation helps verify legitimate requests and identify suspicious activity.

Include digital safety in household emergency plans. Inform trusted family where backups are stored and how to access critical accounts. Write down key account recovery steps and store them securely offline.

Returning Home

Coming home after a disaster can bring relief, but also new risks.

Whether the event was a flood, wildfire, hurricane or severe storm, experts say residents should treat reentry with caution. Hidden damage, contamination and structural problems can make a home unsafe even when it appears intact.

Emergency officials recommend taking time to assess conditions before resuming normal routines.

CHECK FOR STRUCTURAL AND UTILITY HAZARDS

Before entering, look for visible damage outside the home. Sagging roofs, cracked foundations, broken windows or scorch marks can signal structural concerns. If there is any doubt about stability, arrange for a professional inspection.

Utilities deserve special attention. If gas lines, electrical systems or water lines were damaged, turning systems back on without inspection can be dangerous. The Federal Emergency Management Agency advises contacting utility companies if you suspect damage or smell gas. If you detect a gas odor, leave the area immediately and report it from a safe distance.

Always treat downed power lines as if they are live. Standing water near electrical outlets or appliances poses a shock risk.



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WATCH FOR CONTAMINATION AND HEALTH RISKS

Disasters can introduce contaminants into homes. Floodwaters may carry sewage, chemicals or debris. Wildfire ash can contain harmful particles. Even storms that cause long power outages can leave spoiled food and mold behind.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends wearing gloves,

masks and sturdy shoes during cleanup. Porous items such as carpets, mattresses and upholstered furniture exposed to contaminated water often need to be discarded. Mold can begin growing within 24 to 48 hours in damp conditions. Drying and ventilating the home quickly can reduce risk, but extensive mold may require professional remediation.

Food safety is another concern. Throw away any

refrigerated food that has been above safe temperatures for several hours. When in doubt, experts say it is safer to discard questionable items.

DOCUMENT DAMAGE AND PROCEED CAREFULLY

Before starting major cleanup or repairs, document damage with photos and notes for insurance claims. Keeping receipts for cleanup supplies and temporary repairs can

help with reimbursement. The American Red Cross encourages residents to pace themselves. Recovery can be physically and emotionally demanding. Taking breaks, staying hydrated and asking for help can prevent injuries and exhaustion.

Returning home is an important milestone in recovery, but needs to be done thoughtfully. A careful approach helps protect property and personal health.

Neighbor Support Networks

Strong communities often recover from emergencies faster than individuals acting alone.

When disasters strike, neighbors are frequently the first to notice problems, share resources or offer help. Building a support network before an emergency can improve safety, especially for older adults, people with disabilities and families with young children. Emergency managers say preparedness works best when it includes not only households, but also the wider community.

START WITH SIMPLE CONNECTIONS

A support network does not have to be formal. It can begin with getting to know the people who live nearby. Exchanging phone numbers, creating a group text or connecting through a neighborhood app can make communication easier during outages or evacuations.

Residents can also share basic information, such as who may need extra help in a crisis. Someone who uses medical equipment, has limited mobility or lacks transportation may benefit from a check-in plan.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency encourages households to identify a few trusted contacts who can assist or relay information if



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normal communication channels fail.

CHECK ON VULNERABLE NEIGHBORS

After major storms, heat waves or winter events, checking on vulnerable residents can be lifesaving. Older adults, people living alone and those with chronic medical conditions may be at higher risk during power failures or extreme temperatures. A quick knock on the door, phone call or text can confirm whether someone is safe or needs assistance. Neighbors

can help by sharing supplies, offering a warm or cool place to stay, or helping clear debris.

However, safety matters for helpers, too. Avoid entering damaged buildings or performing tasks beyond your ability. When serious concerns arise, contacting local authorities or emergency services is the safest step.

BUILD COMMUNITY READINESS

Community readiness can grow through small actions. Neighborhood groups

sometimes organize preparedness meetings, share emergency contact lists or coordinate who has useful skills such as first aid training. The American Red Cross and local emergency management offices often provide preparedness classes and materials that communities can use.

Shared resources can make a difference. Knowing who owns a generator, who has a chainsaw for debris or who can provide transportation can speed recovery after a disaster. Trust is a major factor.

People are more likely to accept help from those they know. Regular communication and neighborly contact build that trust over time.

Disasters can be isolating, but they can bring communities together. A connected neighborhood is often more resilient than any one household acting alone. By building relationships before an emergency and checking in during difficult times, neighbors can help protect one another. In many cases, the first line of support is not far away. It is right next door.

Preparing for Winter Storms

Winter storms and extreme cold can disrupt daily life, damage property and create dangerous conditions in a matter of hours.

From frozen pipes to icy roads and heating hazards, preparation before temperatures drop can make a significant difference. Emergency officials stress that winter preparedness is not just about comfort. It is about safety for households and communities.

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND PIPES

Freezing temperatures can cause water pipes to burst, leading to costly damage. Insulating pipes in unheated areas such as basements, attics and garages can help reduce risk. Letting faucets drip during extreme cold and opening cabinet doors to allow warm air to circulate can help prevent freezing.

Homeowners need to know how to shut off their water supply in case a pipe does break. Clearing gutters and checking roofs for weak spots can help prevent ice dams and leaks when snow accumulates. The American Red Cross recommends assembling a winter emergency kit with blankets, flashlights, batteries, food, water and medications in case power outages occur.



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HEATING SAFELY

Heating equipment is a leading cause of home fires during colder months. Keep space heaters at least three feet from anything that can burn and turned off when leaving the room or going to sleep. Fireplaces, furnaces and chimneys benefit from annual inspections. Carbon monoxide is another concern when using fuel-burning devices. Installing carbon monoxide detectors and checking their batteries can save lives.

The National Fire Protection Association advises never using ovens or grills to heat a home, as they can create fire and carbon monoxide hazards.

TRAVEL AND EXPOSURE CONCERNS

Winter weather can make travel hazardous. Snow, ice and reduced visibility increase crash risks. The National Weather Service encourages drivers to monitor forecasts and avoid travel during severe storms when possible. If travel

is necessary, drivers should carry an emergency car kit with blankets, water, snacks, a phone charger, a flashlight and a small shovel. Keeping the gas tank at least half full can help prevent fuel lines from freezing.

Cold temperatures pose health risks. Frostbite and hypothermia can occur quickly, especially for children, older adults and people spending extended time outdoors. Dressing in layers, covering exposed skin and

limiting time outside during extreme cold are key precautions.

Preparation works best when done ahead of time. Checking supplies, testing detectors and reviewing plans before a storm arrives can reduce last-minute stress. Winter storms are a part of life in many regions, but their impact can be managed. Taking practical steps early helps households stay safer, warmer and more resilient when temperatures fall.