

# Guidelines for Conducting a Special Needs Emergency Management Assessment

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## INTRODUCTION

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Recent natural disasters in the United States and abroad have reinforced the need to prepare special needs citizens for a variety of disaster outcomes. The intent of this document is to provide a framework for conducting an assessment that will help communities understand the risks faced by special needs populations and the opportunities to best serve community members needing help in times of exceptional distress. After discussing the content of a special needs assessment, this document provides guidelines for how to conduct such a review. The final section outlines several outcomes that may result from a special needs assessment.

### Importance of Addressing Special Needs

Nearly every region of the world remains under threat from natural disasters. In 2005, the Kashmir earthquake in Pakistan illustrated the enormous impacts that such a disaster can have. The Pakistani government reported a death toll of over 87,000. The earthquake disproportionately affected citizens with special needs, including women and children and those with physical, mental, and economic disadvantages. They lacked the necessary resources to prepare for or respond to the disaster and many do not have the resources to rebuild and recover losses from the disaster. The December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake triggered a series of tsunamis that affected communities in Thailand, Indonesia, India, and Sri Lanka, among others. The disaster killed over 185,000 people and resulted in significant impacts among the elderly, poor, women, and children.

Hurricane Katrina, striking Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi in August 2005, illustrated the dire consequences that disasters can have in the United States. Some of the areas impacted most by Katrina were home to large numbers of people with special needs. According to the 2004 U.S. census data, nearly one in four New Orleans residents lived in poverty. A total of 64,000 residents possessed U.S. disability status. Over a quarter of the city's 440,000 people had no access to a car to flee before the hurricane.<sup>1</sup> Hurricane Katrina also strongly affected children in the Gulf States, displacing 300,000 of them from their homes.<sup>2</sup> In the U.S., there are currently 38 million people living with at least one recognized disability and 40% of people 65 and older have disability status. Understanding the risks of people with special needs and knowing how to best serve them in prepare and recover from disaster is essential to their safety and well-being.

Oregonians are subjected to a significant risk of natural disasters. To minimize such threats, communities must be prepared to deal with emergencies, including floods, tsunamis, wildfires, landslides, volcanic hazards, and earthquakes. While floods and wildfires may occur much more frequently, incidents like volcanic eruptions can also seriously endanger citizens' safety. Failing to

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<sup>1</sup> Steinberg, Ted. "A Natural Disaster, a Man-Made Catastrophe, and a Human Tragedy." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 9/9/05. Accessed at <http://chronicle.com/free/2005/09/2005090906n.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Hunter, Marnie. 2005. "Schools Take in Displaced Students: Hurricane Evacuees Begin to Enroll in Other States." *CNN*, September 9.

plan appropriately for all types of emergencies can adversely impact public safety. Citizens with special needs, who may have limited means to prepare for such disasters and leave their homes, face even greater obstacles in the times of disaster.

The state of Oregon is home to a large number of people with special needs. The 2004 U.S. census reports that 528,000 of Oregon's 3.6 million residents have disability status. Nearly 40% of these people are senior citizens. One in every ten households lives below the poverty level. The state is also diversifying in terms of its population demographics. Hispanics now comprise 8% of Oregon's population. Those who do not speak English as a primary language, as well as undocumented individuals living in the state, also face risk from disasters and have needs that must be addressed through mitigation and response planning.

The aftermath of Katrina raised important questions about the government's preparedness to handle catastrophes, including natural disasters and terrorism. A subsequent review by the National Organization on Disability<sup>3</sup> highlighted several problems experienced by a sample of area relief shelters. Half of the emergency shelters did not have working agreements with disability and aging organizations or disaster response policies, plans, and guidelines in place prior to Katrina.

As a result of hurricane Katrina, communities across the country are beginning to prepare for threats that may potentially occur in their jurisdictions. An important component of these planning efforts involves collaboration between emergency management, local government, and social service agencies to better understand and address the risks faced by special needs populations.

## **What is a Special Needs Assessment?**

A special needs assessment is intended to help communities understand which citizens in their community have special needs, the risks they face from natural disasters, and strategies to help citizens with special needs prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. This kind of assessment will vary by community. Just as the types of disasters vary in different communities and regions, so do population demographics. Special needs populations will also differ by community. As shown by Katrina, the poor, elderly, children, mentally and physically disabled, and minority populations have needs that are critical to address.

A special needs assessment can be a helpful tool for communities to prepare at-risk populations for natural disasters. While no formal structure exists for its use, a special needs assessment can help people living with disabilities, or who have additional risks, prepare for natural disasters and thereby reduce the likelihood of loss from disasters. A special needs assessment provides important functions beyond its use as an emergency preparedness tool. Special needs issues can be integrated into hazard mitigation plans and included in grant applications for emergency management funds. This document highlights a process for conducting a special needs assessment with three steps:

1. Identify populations in your community who have special needs.
2. Understand the risks faces by special needs populations and what their needs are in relationship to disaster management.
3. Design and direct emergency management and communication strategies, education and outreach processes, and risk reduction efforts to meet the needs of special needs populations.

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<sup>3</sup> National Organization on Disability. (2005). "Report on Special Needs Assessment for Katrina Evacuees (SNAKE) Project." Accessed at [http://www.nod.org/Resources/PDFs/katrina\\_snake\\_report.pdf](http://www.nod.org/Resources/PDFs/katrina_snake_report.pdf).

# CONDUCTING A SPECIAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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Following, we provide a framework for conducting a special needs assessment based on four factors:

- ◆ Scale
- ◆ Defining special needs
- ◆ Natural disasters
- ◆ Conducting the assessment

## I. Scale

Before beginning a special needs study, the scale of the assessment must be decided. An assessment may be conducted at the community, county, or regional level. A smaller scale makes it easier to connect with individuals and focus efforts on providing resources directly to the target population. Working at the county or regional level can provide a greater number of agencies, resources, and special needs information that can be coordinated on a broader scale. A concerted effort is needed to ensure small-scale assessments are tiered to county or regional programs. Large-scale assessments must reflect the needs and opportunities at a local level where action can be taken on the ground.

## II. Defining Special Needs

Population demographics vary among jurisdictions. It is essential that citizens with needs beyond those of the general population have access to resources to prepare for natural disasters. A community conducting a special needs assessment is responsible for looking at its population and deciding which community members are at particular risk if a disaster occurs. Special needs populations must be self-defined in each individual community by talking with local social service and public health organizations. People with special needs may include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Elderly
- ◆ Physically or mentally disabled
- ◆ Low-income
- ◆ Minority populations
- ◆ Youth
- ◆ Individuals not speaking English as a primary language

A special needs profile is a valuable tool for understanding the community and planning to work with the local population. By looking at local demographics, such as population, age, ethnicity, and those living with disabilities, communities will be able to better direct disaster management resources to special needs populations.

## III. Natural Disasters

Special needs communities may be subjected to greater risk during natural disasters. Age or physical and mental disabilities may restrict mobility making it difficult to evacuate in a disaster; lack of financial resources may impede the ability for low-income populations to invest in emergency preparedness or mitigation measures, and language may result in communication barriers.

Each community conducting a needs assessment must determine which natural disasters pose potential threats to the local population. Oregon's Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan<sup>4</sup> lists a variety of threats facing communities throughout the state. These risks include:

- ◆ Earthquakes
- ◆ Floods
- ◆ Coastal erosion
- ◆ Landslides/debris flows
- ◆ Drought
- ◆ Tsunamis
- ◆ Volcanic hazards
- ◆ Wildfires
- ◆ Severe storms

Terrorism or human-caused disasters may also merit consideration when planning for disasters and impacts upon people with special needs.

#### **IV. Conducting the Assessment**

Several variables need to be addressed when working with special needs individuals. An inventory and subsequent interviews with social service and public health agencies and other community service organizations can lead to a stronger understanding of the perception of disaster risk among these agencies. A more thorough awareness of citizens with special needs can also occur from the inventory and interviews. Coordination with social service and community groups can result in increased collaboration with emergency managers and targeted risk reduction measures for special needs citizens. Following is a list of questions that can help develop a structure for a special needs assessment:

- ◆ Do social service agencies view natural disasters as threats to the people they serve?
- ◆ Do social service agencies have past experiences working with people during natural disasters?
- ◆ To what extent have social service and public health agencies coordinated with emergency management?
- ◆ What strategies do social service agencies have for working with and providing education to special needs populations?
- ◆ What opportunities (emergency preparedness, education, or mitigation) can they suggest to help reduce the risk of special needs populations

See Appendix A for a reference listing of potential interview questions.

In 2004 and 2005, Resource Innovations conducted two special needs assessments in Oregon in Josephine and Jackson Counties in Oregon. Resource Innovations conducted the assessments in coordination with development of community wildfire protection plans in each county. The assessment included interviews with social service agencies and community services organizations to identify the citizens they serve, a definition of special needs in each county, the risk faced by special needs citizens in the case of a wildfire, and input on strategies to coordinate delivery of information

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<sup>4</sup>Accessed at [http://csc.uoregon.edu/pdr\\_website/projects/state/snhmp\\_web/](http://csc.uoregon.edu/pdr_website/projects/state/snhmp_web/)

on fire preparedness, mitigation, and emergency management. Interviews with the social service agencies and organizations helped determine how to better identify those with special needs and offer assistance to better reduce their risk to wildfire.

Josephine County's assessment was completed in 2004 and has resulted in a number of actions that targeted citizens with special needs as part of its integrated fire plan to inform them about wildfire protection and local fuels reduction programs. Josephine County also received a grant through Title II funding to work with low-income and elderly and disabled citizens to create defensible space around their homes. Both counties have also formed special needs committees that are working on emergency management, transportation, and evacuation strategies for licensed and non-licensed care facilities, as well as elderly, disabled, low-income, and youth populations in the counties.

For more information on the Jackson County and Josephine County special needs assessments, visit <http://ri.uoregon.edu/programs/CCE.html>.

## **OUTCOMES FROM A SPECIAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

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A special needs assessment can result in opportunities for communities to better prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters. This section includes several recommendations that may be useful for communities to consider as a way to follow up from information collected during a special needs assessment.

### **I. General**

- ◆ *Create an inventory of all local social service agencies and community service organizations* serving special needs populations. Enter the type of agency, programs offered, population served, participation level, client locations, and agency contact information.
- ◆ *Establish a special needs committee.* This group can serve as a forum for local citizens and representatives of social service and public health agencies and community organizations to discuss issues facing the special needs community and ways to mitigate natural hazard impacts on these people.
- ◆ *Develop contingency plans* to plan for different disaster types and special needs.

### **II. Emergency Management**

- ◆ *Create a special needs registry* that keeps a record of people in the community with special needs. This type of registry can be invaluable for emergency managers to use in helping ensure that people with special needs receive needed assistance during a disaster.
- ◆ *Strengthen communication strategies* for citizens with special needs to help them plan appropriately for emergency situations.
- ◆ *Ensure access to transportation* for individuals during natural disasters.
- ◆ *Develop evacuation routes and identify shelters* to ensure people's safety during catastrophic events.
- ◆ *Create emergency kits for special needs citizens* to encourage their safety during natural disasters. Important considerations include appropriate materials for different disasters and the length of time the kit needs to sustain individuals

### **III. Education**

- ◆ *Conduct trainings for social service agencies to prepare for emergencies.* Use education as a forum for agencies to educate their own employees and facilitate emergency information to clients.

- ◆ *Develop education and outreach programs to help special needs populations understand risks that natural disasters pose in relation to where they live.* Assist people to create plans for preparing and developing evacuation plans for such events. Include informative sessions in social service agencies, schools, and other community locations, conducting public campaigns, and other venues deemed appropriate for reaching target audiences. Outreach media must employ audio, visual, and tactile methods.
- ◆ *Keep special needs citizens informed about what to do in the event that a natural disaster should occur.* Establish a plan using effective methods to ensure that the special needs population receives adequate notice of impending natural disasters.

#### **IV. Mitigation Strategies**

- ◆ *Identify specific mitigation actions* to help special needs citizens prepare for disasters before they occur. Examples may include targeting grant funding for disaster-resistant building materials, defensible space (in case of wildfire), or seismic retrofitting work in assisted living facilities for earthquakes.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Natural disasters occur on annual basis in Oregon. Preparing for these events and conducting a special needs assessment for vulnerable populations can minimize the level of damage incurred in wake of such catastrophes. A special needs assessment is an important tool for any community seeking to adequately prepare underserved citizens for natural disasters. While such assessments are still relatively uncommon, their value to special needs populations is significant. When natural disasters strike, everyone in a community is affected. Yet special needs citizens face greater obstacles due to limited resources, communication barriers, and restricted mobility. Emergency management collaboration with local social service and public health agencies to identify special needs populations and understand the obstacles they face in wake of disaster can greatly reduce their risks.

### **Available Resources for Special Needs Assessments**

American Red Cross – “Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities”

[http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0\\_603\\_,00.html](http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/0,1082,0_603_,00.html)

Oregon’s State Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan

[http://csc.uoregon.edu/PDR\\_website/projects/state/SNHMP\\_WEB/Index.htm](http://csc.uoregon.edu/PDR_website/projects/state/SNHMP_WEB/Index.htm)

State of Oregon Emergency Management

<http://www.oregon.gov/OOHS/OEM/>

University of Washington’s Report on Emergency Preparedness for Special Needs Populations

[http://www.washington.edu/admin/business/oem/special\\_needs\\_resources/Special\\_Needs\\_04\\_26\\_06.pdf](http://www.washington.edu/admin/business/oem/special_needs_resources/Special_Needs_04_26_06.pdf)

Disabilityinfo.gov Emergency Preparedness Links

<http://www.disabilityinfo.gov/digov-public/public/DisplayPage.do?parentFolderId=213>

# APPENDIX A

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## Sample Interview Questions

### Eligibility

- ◆ What populations do you serve?
- ◆ What services do you provide to your clients?
- ◆ How many employees does your agency/organization have?
- ◆ How are you funded?
- ◆ What part of the county are they located in (cities, rural, fire districts, etc.)?
- ◆ Are your clients predominantly renters or homeowners?
- ◆ How many people does your organization serve?

### Eligibility Requirements

- ◆ What indicators or guidelines do you use to determine eligibility for the services or programs that you offer (e.g. age, disabilities, % of the federal poverty line, HUD income limits)?
- ◆ What methods would you use to encourage awareness of natural disasters (e.g. marketing and outreach)?
- ◆ Which disasters do you consider to be an important concern and risk to your community?
- ◆ In terms of natural disasters, what kind of barriers/limitations do you think your clients may experience?
- ◆ What needs do your clients have in relation to reducing their risk to natural disasters?
- ◆ What do you think are the best strategies for educating the population you serve about disaster preparation?
- ◆ What do you think your agency/organization, or other social service organizations, could do to help your clients reduce their risk to natural disasters?
- ◆ Do your clients have needs in relation to reducing their risk to natural hazards?
- ◆ Are there other social service agencies that you recommend we talk with?