**People with Disabilities and Special Needs**

Estimates vary, but as many as one in four people live with some type of dis­ability. Sometimes signs are obvious, such as a wheelchair, a guide dog or a cane. However, many times a disability is not obvious. Whether obvious or not, aware­ness and sensitivity toward persons with disabilities makes good sense.

People with disabilities must assume personal responsibility and be prepared for an emergency. The basic steps of a personal safety plan are the same for everyone.

Emergency Management has been an active participant in the ADA Advisory Board Meetings for a number of years to network with the community and to gain insight on the number of residents with disabilities and their needs during a disaster.

Emergency Management has also been working with agencies representing people with disabilities to further understand their unmet needs. We survey the agency representatives to discover gaps in service, and work to provide reasonable accommodations. As a result of the collaboration:

* The Emergency Operations Center added a People with Disabilities Advisor to the Incident Command Structure to address the needs of residents with physical or mental impairments.
* Training was added for shelter managers on people with disabilities. The training was presented by people with disabilities and included a low-vision simulation exercise. This will be included in all future trainings for shelter managers.
* Emergency Management is working with these representatives on a project to walk through our public shelters to determine how friendly each one is for people with different types of disabilities. Once completed, it will be valuable information for members of our community with disabilities.

Practic­ing disability etiquette makes people with disabilities feel more welcome and comfortable. Here are a few things anyone can do to make a person with a disability feel more at ease in any situation.

* **Remember, a person with a dis­ability is a person first**. Ask before you help. Don’t assume a person with a dis­ability needs your help with a task. If you are asked for help, be sure to ask what kind of assistance is needed.
* **Be sensitive regarding personal space and physi­cal contact.** Respect personal space and remember that people often consider their equipment part of their person.
* **Think before you speak.** Speak to the person, not their aide or companion. Converse with a person with a disability as you would any other person. Get permission from a parent or guardian before interact­ing with children.

Part of any plan is to identify and use all avail­able resources. If you need help or have questions, contact your local Emergency Management agency.

**Special Needs Program**

Some people have medical issues that cannot be accommodated in a typical public shelter. Special Care shelters are available for those people whose health would quickly deteriorate in a public shelter and who have no other safe place to go. Some residents do not have transportation to get to a shelter. The Special Needs Program provides shelter and transportation to Lee County residents at no cost.

People must complete an application to see if their medical issues qualify for a Special Care shelter, or if they need transportation. Applications are available at www.LeeEOC.com and can be submitted directly online or mailed to applicants. There are specific criteria and requirements to be eligible for the Special Care shelter. People in the Special Care shelter must have a caregiver with them during their stay. During an emergen­cy, there is very limited staff working in the shelters, so caregivers are critically important for the health and safety of people with special needs.

There is limited hospital sheltering for people who are extremely high risk and cannot survive outside a hospital environ­ment. The person’s physician must recommend hospital sheltering and give specific details of their medical situation. Hospital sheltering does not include any medical attention and is strictly for riding out the storm in the hospital facility. Should a person require medical attention during the time they are sheltering, they must register as a patient and will be responsible for all hospital and medical fees from that point forward.

As at any other shelter, people must bring the emergency supplies they need to survive. In any emergency situ­ation, everyone must have a plan where they will go if they cannot return to their home because of damage. Food and water will be provided at the shelter. It is a good idea to bring some drinks and snacks. Anyone who requires a special diet must bring that with them.

People staying in the Special Care shelter may bring a pet, dogs or cats, to the shelter, but must bring food, a collar and leash, a crate, any needed medication, vaccination records and cleaning supplies for the animal.

When Lee County enters the 5-day forecast cone for a hurricane or tropical storm, we stop processing Special Needs applications so we can prepare for evacuations.

**Transportation**
LeeTran is Lee County's public transit system. The Special Needs Program also provides transportation via LeeTran and EMS to any of our shelters during an evacuation for Lee County residents. Once an evacuation has been ordered, bus fares are suspended while we work hard to get people to open shelters. LeeTran's regular bus routes become the emergency evacuation bus routes, with a few exceptions:

* The bus route in South Fort Myers will not travel into Collier County. It will stop at the Bonita Springs Kmart.
* The bus route on Pine Island will be activated, transporting residents to the nearest transfer point or shelter.
* A temporary bus route will be activated for Sanibel and Captiva Islands, to assist with evacuating island residents and workers.
* Additional transfer points will be activated to shuttle riders from regular bus routes to shelters.

At the point when the winds reach a sustained 40 mph, Lee County will pull all emergency vehicles from the road until the storm has passed. This includes ambulances, fire trucks, police vehicles and buses.

Contact Emergency Management if you have any questions.