

# **National Council on Disability on Hurricane Katrina Affected Areas**

**September 2, 2005**

## **Basic Info**

People with disabilities in the Gulf Coast areas of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are experiencing tremendous loss of life and devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Current data indicates that people with disabilities are now most at risk in this situation—and will need recovery assistance for months or years. A disproportionate number of the Hurricane survivors are people with disabilities whose needs for basic necessities are compounded by chronic health conditions and functional impairments.

For example:

In Biloxi, Mississippi, a city of about 50,000 people, 26 percent of residents are people with disabilities. This means that there are 10,700 people with disabilities 5 years of age and older who live in Biloxi.

In Mobile, Alabama, a city of 198,915 people, 24 percent of the residents are people with disabilities. This means that there are 43,000 people with disabilities 5 years of age and older who live in Mobile.

In New Orleans, a city of about 484,000 people, 23.2 percent of residents are people with disabilities. This means that there are 102,122 people with disabilities 5 years of age and older who live in New Orleans.

Who are the 102,122 people with disabilities who live in New Orleans? About 10 percent (or 12,000) of them are people ages 5 to 20 years old; 61 percent (or 63,000) of them are aged 21 to 64 years old; and 29 percent (or 27,000) of the people are 65 years of age and older.

The 102,122 people with disabilities living in New Orleans include people who are blind, people who are deaf, people who use wheelchairs, canes, walkers, crutches, people with service animals, and people with mental health needs. At least half of the people with disabilities in New Orleans who are of working age are not employed. Many of the people rely on a variety of government programs such as Supplemental Security Income and Medicaid to help them meet their daily service and support needs.

## **Implications**

The total destruction of the physical environment and public/private infrastructure and communications systems in the Gulf Coastal areas affected by Hurricane Katrina has life-threatening implications for all citizens with disabilities, and those without disabilities. The implications for these people include:

- for people with physical disabilities and who are over 65 years of age, being unable to leave their homes, group homes, nursing homes, hospitals without significant assistance;
- for all people with disabilities, being prevented from using any type of accessible public transportation which in all likelihood do not exist anymore;
- for people who are blind, being unable to even get around in their own flooded neighborhoods because they can no longer navigate the environmental landscape;
- for all people with disabilities driven by floods from institutions or group homes or nursing homes, needing to be housed in less than satisfactory conditions with considerably less than the necessary range of services and supports they need for an indeterminate amount of time;
- for people with disabilities who have service animals, are unable to rely on those animals outside of the house or group home because these animals cannot navigate safely in the flooded streets;
- for people who are deaf, being challenged to access emergency information through television, radio, TTY, etc. because public communications systems are somewhat compromised;
- for all people with disabilities, being unable to secure life-saving food and water because many of them are trapped within the confines of inadequate supplied shelters, stadiums, etc.; and
- people may have lost or become separated from the drugs they rely on daily for diabetes, heart disease and other chronic ailments. Pharmacies in the affected areas may have insufficient stocks of vital drugs like insulin for diabetics, creating a need to organize efforts to import and distribute essential medicines in the area. In addition, many pharmacies have been raided by looters.

### **Where to go for help?**

People with disabilities affected by Hurricane Katrina should try to contact their local emergency response officials by using the 9-1-1 system. This system will handle voice and TTY callers.

Louisiana government officials advise that in addition to the existing special needs shelters that have opened in Alexandria and Monroe, shelters have been opened in two other communities in Louisiana. These shelters are staffed by the Department of Health and Hospitals and Department of Social Services. While these shelters are open it is strongly encouraged that citizens first try to evacuate to the north with their families and get out of harm's way. These are shelters of last resort and are not for the general public.

At 10:00 am this morning, an additional shelter was opened in Lafayette. At this time, special needs shelters have been opened in Alexandria, Monroe, Lafayette, and Baton Rouge. Due to the uncertainty of the damage that Baton Rouge and Lafayette will sustain from the storm, DHH officials stress that it is very important to move to a shelter further north in Alexandria or Monroe if at all possible.

Special Needs Shelters are designed for individuals who are homebound, chronically ill or who have disabilities and are in need of medical or nursing care, and have no other place to receive care.

Those seeking shelter will be screened by nurses to determine the level of care needed. Only people who meet admission criteria can be sheltered. If their condition is too critical, they will be referred to a hospital for sheltering, or admission. If their condition is not severe enough for Special Needs Sheltering, they will be referred to a general shelter.

Special triage telephone lines are being established in each region to accept the calls of citizens seeking special needs sheltering. Citizens with special needs seeking shelter must call telephone number in their area BEFORE attempting to access a shelter. These numbers are listed below.

Alexandria:	800-841-5778	Shreveport:	800-841-5776
Baton Rouge:	800-349-1372	Monroe:	866-280-7287
Houma/Thibodaux:	800-228-9409	Slidell/Hammond:	866-280-7724
Lafayette:	800-901-3210		
Lake Charles:	866-280-2711		

Special Needs Shelters are not designed for the general public or for nursing home patients. Nursing homes in Louisiana are required to have emergency evacuation plans in place that ensure the health and safety of their residents. In most instances, these plans allow for homes in affected areas to transport their patients to nursing homes in areas safe from the storm.

Health officials note that if individuals have health problems that require medical expertise and must evacuate, it is best for them to go with family members or caretakers north and west to areas that are out of harm's way. These will provide medical support services only. Because of limited staffing, those going to a Special Needs Shelter must have a caretaker to assist with ongoing support and they should bring all necessary supplies including sheets, blankets and pillows.

Community And Residential Services Association (CARSA), a trade organization for providers of services with developmental disabilities, in cooperation with the ARC of Louisiana, the Developmental Disabilities Council and The Advocacy Center, is available to assist families who may have relatives who were evacuated from community homes and other service programs in the Greater New Orleans area.

Families seeking information may call the following numbers for assistance:

**CARSA** – 225-343-8811

**The ARC of Louisiana** – 1-866-966-6261

**Developmental Disabilities Council – 1-800-450-8108**

**The Advocacy Center (Baton Rouge) – 1-800-711-1696**

**The Advocacy Center (Lafayette) – 1-800-822-0210**

**How can we help?**

(This note was distributed by an Independent Living Center)

Dear IL Colleague,

As you may know, the Centers for Independent Living in Biloxi, Mississippi and New Orleans have been gravely affected by the hurricane. In fact the Biloxi, MS center was totally destroyed. Many of you are asking how you can help. Here is what we have learned from colleagues in those states.

Sending money is the first priority. Sending supplies to those centers is helpful too but NOT RIGHT NOW, because they can't get through the water.

Here are the suggested options for right now:

- 1) Send a check or credit card payment to the Red Cross and designate it for Hurricane Relief, or designate it for people with disabilities in the Biloxi/Hattiesburg or New Orleans areas.
- 2) If you want to send money for the CILs that are dealing with this disaster directly, here are your options:

For the Biloxi Center, mail the check (payable to LIFE of Central MS and designated for the Biloxi Center) to:

LIFE of Central Mississippi  
754 North President Street, Suite 1  
Jackson, MS 39202

For the centers in Louisiana (make checks payable to Resources for Independent Living - this is a branch of the N.O. center - and designate for the New Orleans center) and mail to:

Resources for IL  
11931 Industriplex Blvd. Suite 200  
Baton Rouge, LA 70809

We have also learned from Mack Marsh of the Shreveport Center that centers in Shreveport, Baton Rouge, and Lake Charles are assisting evacuees. Mack says they would also appreciate supplies if there is any way to get those supplies to the centers. His

list includes: manual wheelchairs, hospital beds, adult diapers, bed pads, catheters and other supplies. The address for the Baton Rouge center is shown above, addresses for the Shreveport and Lake Charles centers follow.

Southwest LA Independence Center, Inc.  
Mitch Granger  
1202 Kirkman, Suite C  
Lake Charles, LA 70601

New Horizons, Inc.  
Jerry Kidwell  
9300 Mansfield Road, Suite 204  
Shreveport, LA 71118

### **Coordinated Federal-State-Local response**

A coordinated Federal Disability Recovery Plan for Hurricane Katrina should be immediately developed and implemented. The decisions the Federal Government makes, the priority it accords to civil rights, and the methods it adopts to ensure uniformity in the ways agencies handle their disability-related responsibilities are likely to be established in the early days of this emergency situation and be difficult to change if not set on the right course at the outset. This response must include people with disabilities.

An urgent priority is to provide funds and secure resources that specifically meet the critical needs of Katrina survivors with disabilities, help to rebuild the organizations that serve them, identify accessible temporary and permanent housing and address the specific requests being made by leaders in the devastated areas and those in the areas that people with disabilities are being evacuated to. At the minimum, this response should include:

**Accessible Disaster Facilities and Services.** Communications technology is vital for people with disabilities during this disaster to help assess damage, collect information, and deploy supplies. Access to appropriate facilities -- housing, beds, toilets, and other necessities -- must be monitored and made available to individuals with disabilities before, during, and after a disaster. This access also must be ensured for those who incur a disability as a result of a disaster.

**Accessible Communications and Assistance.** As communications technology and policy become more integral to disaster relief and mitigation, providing accessibility to the technology for people with disabilities will be life-saving. For example, people with hearing impairments require interpreters, TTY communications, and signaling devices. People with cognitive impairments, such as those with developmental disabilities, Alzheimer's disease, or brain injury, will likely require assistance to cope with hurricane-ravaged surroundings and to minimize confusion factors.

**Accessible and Reliable Rescue Communications.** Accessible and reliable communications technology is critical to ensuring fast, effective, and competent field treatment of people with disabilities. Communications technologies can assist field

personnel in rescue coordination and tracking and can be combined with databases that house information on optimal treatment for particular disabilities or that track the allocation of post-disaster resources.

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Note: The National Council on Disability is an independent federal agency making recommendations to the President and Congress to enhance the quality of life for Americans with disabilities and their families.

Mark S. Quigley  
Director of Communications  
National Council on Disability  
1331 F Street, NW, Suite 850  
Washington, DC 20004  
202-272-2008