

# Lessons Learned: Disaster Preparedness Is Key

By Herb Weiss

## “Be prepared.”

This well-recognized slogan has been faithfully followed by generations of Boy Scouts in every American community. In an era of horrific terrorist attacks, unanticipated natural disasters, crime, and other types of crises, this sound advice takes on special meaning for senior centers and other community service organizations. At The National Council on the Aging/American Society on Aging Joint Conference in April, expert panelists gave their tips on how to face and react to impending crises successfully.

## The Value of the Blizzard Bag

“Disasters can come in all shapes and sizes, from dealing with a sudden heart attack to responding to sudden ice storms,” states Diane Harry, Coordinator, Mercy Senior Care, at St. Joseph’s Regional Health Center. The Hot Springs, AR, senior center professional told attendees of her panel discussion that an injury prevention checklist and a garden first aid guide are two very simple ways to prevent “the little things from happening.”

Blizzard bags filled with shelf stable meals (including a can of Ensure Plus, canned soups and pudding) that meet 1/3 of a senior’s recommended daily allowance were the perfect solution for getting nutritious meals to meals-on-wheels clients if Y2K blackouts had ever occurred, says Harry. When this impending nationally publicized disaster fizzled, the meal substitute plan was perfect to implement on holiday weekends or during winter storms, she said.

Harry said that the blizzard bag policy helped when Arkansas was hit with a severe ice storm in December 2000. The unexpected

sleet created about a half an inch of ice on the roads, toppling power lines and cutting electricity and heat to thousands of homes. Volunteers driving pickup trucks and four-wheel-drive vehicles delivered the shelf stable meals to meals-on-wheel clients.

With telephone lines down, Harry and her staff went door to door and used the radio to get information on coping with the winter storm. Harry opened her kitchen to the local utility company, feeding hot meals to 600 electrical workers a day. More than 14,000 utility workers came from across the nation to help the local utility company get phone and electrical services up and running. According to Harry, the nontraditional partnership with the electric company resulted in a donation of \$10,000 worth of canned goods. A formal agreement has now been signed between the senior center and electric company to work together again during winter storms.

## Communications in a Crisis: Columbine

Senior centers and others may also learn from the experiences of school districts responding to emergency situations. When unanticipated emergencies happen, schools must work hard to get their message out to the public.

A student shooting in April 1999 at Columbine High School kept Marilyn Saltzman, manager of Communications Services for Jefferson Public Schools in Golden, CO, in almost constant daily contact with local and national press for months. Saltzman began getting calls from media right after the shooting of students at the high school in Littleton, CO.

When she arrived, “it was quite a chaotic scene,” with frightened children and teachers running away from the school building. A staging area was quickly set up at a local elementary school where parents could meet their children. Hours later the only parents left at the site were those with lost children. Before day’s end, Saltzman would meet with the local sheriff’s office to coordinate the actions of all the county agencies to develop a media strategy for the next day, week, and month.

“We were getting a thousand media calls every day,” Saltzman says. In the first 24 hours after the shootings, two communication teams were mobilized. One team was placed at the site for several days after the tragedy. For three weeks, the other communications team was located at a local public library that served as an emergency communications center. This site housed a number of agencies, including the police, district attorney’s office, federal emergency management, and school district. Seven television sets, cell phones, fax machines, computers, and poster makers were available for use by those staffing the communication efforts.

“The media for a tragedy like this one never ends or goes away,” she noted. Two television specials aired months after the event.

Saltzman urged senior centers to plan where to locate their emergency communications center in case of a serious crisis that meant they could not use their building. A command center should be set up in or near a senior center so that center staff would be readily accessible to appropriate public safety and law enforcement officials.

The Columbine High School tragedy taught Saltzman that “there is no such thing as too much communication.” School staff need to know what has happened, and there is an urgent need to get pertinent information out, she said. For example, for six weeks after the disaster,

## CRISIS PRIMER

### What Senior Centers Need

- Better links between senior centers and mental health services
- Community-wide planning
- Emergency pharmaceutical services network
- A well-maintained list of volunteers
- Emergency transportation plan

### Disaster Readiness Tips

- Ensure that you have a general crisis plan in place.
- Upgrade your disaster plan.
- Connect with your community’s emergency response agencies.
- Develop a plan to support family of staff members and clients.

*These tips are used with permission of the American Hospital Association.*

each morning e-mail was sent to 145 schools in the city’s school district to update staff about funerals, medical conditions of wounded students, and where to send donations. She and her staff worked hard to determine what questions the media would ask and then make posters listing all the answers to the potential questions they compiled. “Key messages and speaking points must be kept consistent,” Saltzman said.

While the media may be the fastest way to communicate to a broad audience, she noted that you should not forget faxes, e-mails, voice mails, or community meetings. Daily staff meetings can keep the staff and families informed. “The more sensitive the topic, the better off for you to use face-to-face communications.”

Saltzman’s school district now has developed a much more comprehensive media response plan. “You don’t want to be in the middle of a crisis and grab the policy book from the shelf.” She said that every person in a school or senior center has a role to play in a crisis, and must know what that role is.

## September 11: Coping with the Aftermath

Igal Jellinek, Executive Director, Council of Senior Centers and Services of NYC, noted that the September 11 terrorist attack touched 1.5 million New Yorkers who personally knew someone who worked at the World Trade Center. Hundreds of senior centers had to cope with the devastating aftermath of the disaster too.

Like many Americans, Jellinek learned about the attack while listening to his radio. "Sirens were blaring," he remembered. In the days following the disaster, seniors flocked to senior centers through the city," he said, because they considered them safe havens.

According to Jellinek, communication with both clients and senior center staff should begin immediately and be continuous in the days following a major disaster. "You must ensure that people (clients) don't feel isolated and homebound."

Jellinek said that senior centers faced multiple challenges of getting people food and prescriptions and communicating with the homebound and the array of ethnic groups living around Ground Zero. While a grant allowed his agency to deliver needed items, such as radios, flashlights, and alarm clocks to enable seniors to know when to take their medications, Jellinek called for community-wide planning to prepare for future crises.

Jellinek said there were a number of challenges as a result of September 11. Communication was difficult, especially for those living near Ground Zero. Transportation for clients was a major problem and there were also weak links between senior centers and mental health services. In addition, he said that young staff had little life experience with such disasters, while some seniors with unpleasant World War II experiences had symptoms of post traumatic stress syndrome.

In order to prepare for future disasters, Jellinek called for community-wide plan-

ning, ensuring that everyone is on the same page. For example, there needs to be a network of emergency pharmaceutical services that can both fill medications and get them to seniors in the community who need them. Restaurants that are both willing and able to provide seniors with emergency food must be recruited in every neighborhood. Funds should be raised to purchase shelf stable meals to be delivered to the seniors who are homebound.

Jellinek also noted the importance of maintaining a list of volunteers from neighborhoods and local institutions that would like to assist others in the community. He said that an emergency transportation plan should be in place for use in quickly moving people out of a disaster zone.

The probability is high that your organization may in some way be affected by a crisis. And, while it may not be as tragic or disrupting as Columbine or September 11th, community service organizations such as senior centers should be prepared and ready to meet the needs of seniors and others. ♦

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### RESOURCES

**[www.oep-ndms.dhhs.gov](http://www.oep-ndms.dhhs.gov)**

The National Disaster Medical System of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

**[www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)**

Federal Emergency Management Agency

**[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**[www.hopkins-biodefense.org](http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org)**

Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Studies