

## *Disaster Readiness and Seniors*

- by Mary Jo McNett Graham RN, MSN, MS-HSRP

Senior citizens (those 65 and older) comprise 8% of the Dakota County population of 388,001 according to the 2005 population estimates. The Dakota County senior population, while less than the 12.1% of all of Minnesota, and the 11.5% nationwide, is growing.<sup>1</sup> The overall population in Dakota County grew at a rate nearly twice that of the state from 2000-2006, some of this growth was in the senior population. Why? The addition of several senior housing complexes and assisted living facilities, Dakota County's proximity to the Twin Cities for many social, cultural and athletic activities and access to healthcare make Dakota County a destination of choice for older citizens and gives long term residents reasons to remain in the area.

The 31,000+ persons over the age of 65 in the County, and the growing number of those that are over 85 means that the County's efforts at Disaster Preparedness must incorporate the differing needs of the elderly in a disaster. New trends in care and services for the elderly encourage them to remain in their homes. As such, planning for disasters needs to go beyond the traditional institutional / facility approach and encompass independent living environments. Senior citizens living alone have more need to be prepared than institutions, because they will not have the access to the number of resources that are available in institutional and group living settings.

What is a disaster? A disaster may be as extensive as the hurricanes that affected the Gulf Coast or localized such as the recent flooding in southern Minnesota that destroyed homes and businesses, and the recent ice storms that shut down power and services to the midsection of the country. The definition of a disaster is less important than thinking about the interruption of utilities and/or services which people depend on for daily living. What if you were without power in your home for several days? What would you do if there was a Pandemic Flu outbreak that required people to be quarantined or remain out of public places? Think in terms of having core supplies on hand for a few days, ways to contact key family members or friends, and who you can notify when you might need additional assistance. Make the planning and preparation a family event (children and grandchildren should be part of the plan) and assure that

family members have copies of important documents in the event that your home and belongings may be destroyed.

The following are some suggestions for seniors to prepare for the unexpected:

1. **Documents:** Even if you do not have trouble remembering things, in times of stress, it is often difficult to recall things. Therefore, have the following things written down and placed in a clear plastic page cover on or near your refrigerator (keeps the papers from getting wet and soiled). Additionally, make sure that your family member and/or guardian has copies of these items.
  - a. Your health care / advanced directives.
  - b. A current copy of all medications you are on, the dosage you take, and when you take them. Also note the pharmacy where you get your medications filled. Your pharmacist should be able to print a copy of your medication profile for you as long as ALL of your medications are filled at the same pharmacy. If you have medications from more than one pharmacy, then add these to your list. A sample form is attached.
  - c. If you are on over the counter medications such as aspirin, allergy medications, herbal supplements, etc. be sure you add them to your list.
  - d. BE SURE YOU NOTE ANY ALLERGIES YOU HAVE ON THE MEDICATION PROFILE. People who are not as familiar with your health history may be involved in your care in the event of an emergency or disaster.
  - e. Names, addresses, phone numbers of: your doctor, dentist, pharmacist, eye doctor, family members starting with the member who would have health care power of attorney or the person who helps you make your decisions.
2. **Supplies:**
  - a. Keep a case of bottled water available.

- b. Keep canned soup, tuna, crackers, dried fruit, nuts and other foodstuffs that could be consumed if your power was not available. A manual can opener or the canned soups with the flip tops will be needed.
  - c. Keep some charcoal and a grill or gas grill supplies so that you could cook without power. Matches are essential.
  - d. Consider buying a cordless phone or corded phone. If the power were out, the outlet for the phones may still be working. Cordless phones (corded phones) do not need a power source to continue to work. Cell phones and cordless phones need power sources for recharging.
  - e. If you do not have a generator, keep a stockpile of blankets in the winter if the power went off and you would be without heat.
  - f. Flashlights and batteries are important to keep on hand.
  - g. Make sure that you always have at least a one week supply of medications. In the event of a disaster, it may take a few days before non-emergent medications may be able to be dispensed.
  - h. Many stores are now selling radios that also have ports to recharge batteries such as for cell phones. The advantage is that the radio is also a source of communication with the outside world if your power is off. Consider purchasing one of these or requesting one as a gift for a special occasion.
  - i. Have extra books, puzzles, games available.
3. **Valuables:** Think about your valuables such that if you lost these items, they would be irreplaceable (photos, documents, etc.). A great family group project might be to place old family photos and memorabilia on alternative storage devices – grandchildren are great with new media sources and can learn a lot about their family history by putting old pictures on the new devices. Each family member can then have a copy of the device so that if one is lost, they are not all lost forever. Make sure other valuables are stored appropriately and that family members are

aware of what the items are and where you keep them. If your area tends to flood, storing items in the basement is not wise.

4. **Routine:**

- a. Be sure you continue to eat and drink and maintain your strength.
- b. Exercise – think of lifting weights to maintain strength (canned goods are great weights). Walk around the house or outside if the disaster permits. Climb stairs as your health permits.
- c. Check your battery operated radio for updates from the community.
- d. Check in with friends and family members.
- e. Read and/or work puzzles by natural light during the day.

5. **Important phone numbers: <Dori, can you insert the telephone numbers you would like people to be aware of? Thanks.>**

The above listing is not intended to be all-inclusive, but provides a guide to begin thinking about preparing for the unexpected. Do not be one who says in the time of an emergency, GEE I WISH I WOULD HAVE!!! BE PREPARED, BE READY, BE SAFE. IT IS A GIFT YOU CAN GIVE YOURSELF.

Submitted by:

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MRC Advisory Council

Dakota County

### Medication Profile

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Allergies: \_\_\_\_\_

<i>Medication Name/Dosage</i>	<i>Reason for Med.</i>	<i>When to take and how many</i>	<i>Start Date / Review Date</i>

<sup>1</sup> <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/27037.html>