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Title: Federal Policies for Helping Disabled, Elderly, Juvenile, and other Populations, Before During and After Natural Disasters

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Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Emergency, Preparedness, Response and Recovery.

Hello and thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing. Thank you to Congressman Payne for bringing attention to this important topic. My name is Luke Koppisch, I am the Deputy Director of the Alliance Center for Independence, a 501C3 organization located in Edison, NJ. ACI is one of 11 Centers for Independent Living in NJ and over 400 throughout the United States. ACI extends an open invitation to visit our Center.

The Alliance Center for Independence (ACI) began working on preparedness efforts during Hurricane Irene in 2011. Since then we have trained over 700 people with disabilities on disaster/emergency preparedness, organized two overnight emergency shelter simulations with people with disabilities and emergency managers and have presented at many conferences and webinars including two FEMA webinars. We also trained 100s of emergency managers and first responders on disability etiquette and assisting people with disabilities during a disaster. ACI formed the first Core Advisory Group (CAG) in NJ and have worked closely with emergency managers, FEMA, VOAD and the Red Cross. ACI encourages people to take personal responsibility during an emergency. We teach individuals with disabilities how to prepare, work with emergency managers in their communities, how to put a communication plan in place, create a Go Bag and to be ready to shelter in place.

During Super Storm Sandy we were called to action providing guidance and assistance to survivors with disabilities in our catchment area of Middlesex, Somerset and Union counties in NJ. Our staff contacted 3000 of our consumers and offer assistance. ACI staff volunteered their time to assist in operating a hotline set up by Portlight Inclusive Disaster Strategies, Inc. to assist survivors of Hurricane Harvey two years ago.

Our work is important because:

- 54 million people in the United States have a disability, including 3 million children with a disability.
- 61% of people with disabilities have not made plans to quickly and safely evacuate their homes.

- Only 24% of people with disabilities made emergency plan preparations specific to their disability.
- 2.4 million people with a disability have medical equipment that require electricity.
- Currently, people with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely than non-disabled people to be critically or fatally injured in a disaster. Our communities need to be ready in a disaster.

Emergency Preparedness Response and Recovery fall under Title II and Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act as well the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

According to Paul Timmons, President of Portlight Inclusive Disaster Strategies (PIDS), “Right now, most planning occurs ‘FOR’ people with disabilities and older adults, not ‘WITH’ us. Moving forward we need to ensure there is substantial leadership and participation during emergency planning.”

To truly include Americans with disabilities, we recommend that emergency planners and others involved in disaster preparedness, implement the following:

- Current practices for communicating and broadcasting emergency warnings to the public are understood by persons with hearing challenges;
- Accessibility of all emergency response communications, including 911 and 211;
- Current evacuation and training procedures need to include people who require mobility support, sensory disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism, anxiety and other mental health concerns;
- Trained personnel to implement plans that include people with disabilities;
- Current transportation is accessible to evacuate older persons and those with disabilities (We have met with NJ Transit and suggested that Access Link’s NJ Transit ADA Required Transportation Service be deployed during a disaster);
 - Transit personnel are trained to operate the vehicles and their accessibility features during emergencies;
- Access to food, water, medicine, and power;
- Information is available in accessible formats, including video with captioning, audio, and plain language formats;
- General population shelters are ready to accommodate and provide services to those with disabilities instead of sending them unnecessarily to segregated and more costly “special needs” or medical shelters;
- Utilize Centers for Independent Living to provide various services before during and after a natural disaster (these could include counseling services, to alleviate social isolation, filling out paperwork, setting up hotlines etc.);
 - Shelters are accessible and have trained personal assistants, accessible showers and toilets, flexibility in meals (MREs are not accessible for many people with disabilities), and equal access to communication;

- Equal access to emergency registries operated by state, federal, and nonprofit emergency programs;
- Improve current response time from the Red Cross, Office of Emergency Management and FEMA for critical and immediate needs from public
- Service animals are admitted to shelters under the ADA are shall not be separated from their owners;
- Health maintenance items/assistive technology stay with those who use mobility and communication devices, sign language interpreters, and personal assistants;

During Super Storm Sandy, there were 285 fatalities. According to EPA nearly 50% of the deaths were elderly or had disabilities.

If implemented our recommendations will no doubt save lives in future disasters. We hope that the pending REAADI for Disasters ACT legislation will address our concerns.

Thank you