

You First Podcast Episode 11: Special Needs Shelters - Your Life Raft in an Emergency

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Keith Casebonne: Hello. Welcome to this episode of "You First - The Disability Rights Florida Podcast." I'm Keith Casebonne. Thank you so much for joining me today.

First, a quick reminder. I want to let listeners know to complete our 2018 Planning Survey online. We depend on you to tell us what disability issues are most important to you. We put together a short survey we would like all of you to complete.

You can access that on the Web at disabilityrightsflorida.org/survey. Share the link with your friends and family. We need to get your comments by July 21st, 2017.

Here in the Southeast, it's everybody's least favorite season, hurricane season. As we record this episode, one tropical storm is already about to make landfall along the Gulf Coast. There is no time like the present to get prepared.

All Floridians, and especially Floridians with disabilities who may need assistance with evacuation or while in a shelter, should plan ahead. Planning ahead also includes learning about your rights and responsibilities as well as knowing what all of your options are.

To tell us more about this today are our guests, Judy Silverstein, Regional Special Needs Consultant at the Florida Department of Health, and our own Carol Stachurski, Program Operations Manager at Disability Rights Florida. Thank you both for joining us today.

Let's start with, what should you do before a disaster or an emergency situation occurs?

Carol Stachurski: The first thing you need to do is plan ahead, have a plan, so that when a storm is hitting landfall or some other type of emergency happens, you already have a plan.

It's much easier to evacuate if you already have a kit. You already have a plan for your pets and your service animals. It makes life much easier at the last minute.

Judy Silverstein: I'd also like to add, Carol, that we'd love to have our listeners think about what their sheltering plan is. If no other option exists, have them register for the Special Needs Registry.

That's pretty much owned by the Division of Emergency Management, although they work in concert with local counties and the Florida Department of Health.

Keith: Why have a Special Needs Registry? Why should someone register?

Carol: Someone should register for the registry because this allows Division of Emergency Management, and the county level emergency managers, and the Department of Health, who helps staff the shelters.

It helps them plan ahead, know who's coming, what the needs of those people might be. It helps them to plan.

Judy: It also helps those who register receive information from local emergency management officials about evacuation, about sheltering options, and about emergencies and updates.

Keith: That's very interesting. I had no idea there was such a service.

Carol: Once the person fills out the form on the registry, that information all goes from the Division of Emergency Management at the state level down to the county because the counties are the ones that are going to respond the most and need to plan the most.

That information goes from the state level down to the county level.

Judy: What's so great about that is that it helps us plan in terms of cots, in terms of food, in terms of other resources, and to have a general idea of what we will be dealing with in terms of our population.

Keith: Because just as important as it is for all of us to make plans, it's just as important for you guys to be able to plan for what our plans are if we need your help in an emergency.

Judy: Correct. The registry helps us take care of those who have no other option when an emergency exists. If we know what their needs are ahead of time, we can be on top of things.

Carol: Which brings us to Judy's saying that it's very helpful for people to remember when they're making their decisions and choosing options is that, "A shelter is a life raft and not a cruise ship."

Part of your plan should be other options besides sheltering.

Judy: I couldn't agree more because sometimes it's better to stay in your home with some assistance because you know your routine, you're comfortable. You know how long the walk is from your bedroom to your dining area.

You know what food you have available. You know what to do if you should lose power.

In a shelter, you're facing a whole different situation and one you're not used to. It might be a little more crowded. It might be very crowded. It may be noisier. The comfort level will be definitely different than you have at home.

Keith: Would you say it's more of a last resort then to use a Special Needs Shelter?

Judy: Yeah, Keith, that's absolutely correct. A shelter is an option of last resort. We'd like to leave those for our population that doesn't have another choice, doesn't have a caregiver, friends, or family that can stay with them.

Carol: Or the resources to go to a hotel, too, because that's another option that can be part of your plan as one of the options is to go to a hotel.

If you have the resources to do that, it's going to be much more comfortable than a shelter.

Keith: Who may qualify for the Special Needs Registry?

Judy: We generally look at the population that can live at home with minimal assistance, and that's assistance taking medication or performing medical care, such as wound care.

You would possibly be eligible if you had a need for electricity, such as an electric wheelchair, CPAP, a nebulizer that needed to be plugged in, an oxygen concentrator that needed electricity.

It also applies to those who have mild-to-moderate cognitive impairment. You should really know what your limitations are.

As we mentioned, those who need minimal assistance with medical care, They are a little higher than the level of folks who would go to the general population shelter. You need a little bit of assistance.

We do have nurses from the Florida Department of Health at the Special Needs Shelters.

Keith: That's an obvious difference between a standard shelter and a Special Needs Shelter. Can you tell us more reasons why a Special Needs Shelter differs from a standard shelter and why a person with a disability may choose a Special Needs Shelter?

Judy: At the Special Needs Shelter, we'll have a backup generator. The electricity can continue. That's under ideal conditions. Of course, we can't predict what might happen.

We also have clinical staff from the Florida Department of Health that can assist, but it is limited. Again, we go back to that visual of the life raft versus the cruise ship. It's minimal assistance.

You will also probably have a cot. You're more likely in a Special Needs Shelter to have a cot than you would, say, at a general population shelter, which might be run by other agencies.

Keith: What would trigger someone to need to go to a Special Needs Shelter?

Judy: That's a great question, Keith. We like to look at preparation as an all-hazards approach.

Although we think very hard about hurricanes, particularly between June 1st and December 1st in Florida, of course, there might be other emergencies that trigger the opening of a shelter.

It's something county emergency management, and local agencies, and politicians think about very carefully. It could be a chemical spill that's very bad. It might be flooding.

Some of these don't have as much advanced warning, say, as a hurricane would have.

Keith: That's a good point. We certainly focus on hurricane season here in Florida, but there are many types of emergencies that could certainly cause someone to need to prepare, and be ready, and go to a shelter.

Carol: You should have a kit prepared all year. Don't wait for hurricane season.

Judy: Once again, there's no time like the present to get yourself registered. One point that we had not made earlier is that you should register if you think there's even a chance you would go to the Special Needs Shelter.

It doesn't obligate you, but it does mean you will receive a call should a Special Needs Shelter open.

Keith: That's really interesting because I could see someone not registering because they didn't want to lock themselves into that option.

Judy: If you think there's any chance that a caregiver, a family member, or a friend would not be available, go ahead and get yourself registered. Once again, it helps us all plan for what is unexpected.

Keith: What should you take to a Special Needs Shelter?

Carol: This is where you're planning ahead and preparing your kit. Some of the things you need to remember when you're making up your kit is, as Judy said earlier, food for three to five days, Judy, is what the recommendation is?

Judy: Yeah, I'd say three to seven days would even be smarter in case you're displaced.

Carol: Nutritious food, high protein if you can do it, does not require heating or a microwave because you may not have those. If you're going to a pet-friendly shelter or to a hotel, don't forget your pet's needs, food or whatever your pet might need.

Important papers such as a list of your medications, insurance papers, birth certificates, that thing, the copies of them...

Keith: Your household medications.

Carol: And your medications. Those are some important things that need to be in your kit. Judy has some really good ideas. She has a kit all made up and uses it as a visual in some of the training she does, if you want to talk about that a little bit, Judy.

Judy: You did a nice job there, Carol. Thank you. People should think about really packing just what they need, comfortable clothing, some changes that could possibly be washed in a sink, if necessary.

This would be if you were staying at home and you might lose power to think about having a box or a bag with some of the same items near your kitchen, or near a door, or near your bed would be smart, too.

Some changes of clothes, some things that you would need for a first aid kit -- Band-Aids, wound supplies for wound care, diabetic supplies.

We talked already about medication is important. Make sure you have a list of everything you're taking along with the dosage and perhaps the phone number of your provider.

It would also be smart to bring a book or some music, but don't bring anything very valuable. You do want something to pass the time. Maybe, even your checkers if they fold up or a word game that you can bring with you to pass the time, maybe, some magazines.

We like to say medical supplies for enough for three to seven days would be great. If you're having care from either a nurse registry or a home health agency, bring that phone number with you.

Obviously, changes of clothes would go with underwear and socks. We do encourage you to bring a caregiver with you.

Keith: Now you mentioned earlier planning for pets. If you have a service animal, do these shelters allow service animals? Is that different than a standard shelter, for example, or would any shelter take service animals?

Carol: All of the shelters are required to allow service animals. You may, and this is the difference with pets, if you have a pet and it's a not service animal, you want to make sure you are looking at the pet-friendly shelters.

There is a list of those on our website under resources, Emergency Management Resources. If it's a service animal, you may want to look at the Special Needs Shelter over general population for the reasons of power. There's more space.

Your animal is going to be more comfortable as well as you.

Judy: To reiterate, those who have service animals would include a dog or a miniature horse, but very specific about what size the miniature horse could be and what specific tasks they perform that relates to a disability.

Be prepared. We're talking about what you can bring to a shelter.

In addition to a positive attitude, bring as much information as you can so that folks know that you have a service animal.

Carol: Another thing I'd like to mention, Judy had mentioned bringing something to keep busy, books or whatever. It's important for people to think about that because we're so electronic now and digital.

Like she said, don't bring equipment that's worth a lot of money. You might want to bring a real book rather than your Kindle or your iPad that not only do you have to watch out for your belongings, but they also require electricity to recharge. Bring an old-fashioned book.

Keith: Candy Crush only goes so long in a shelter.

Carol: Exactly.

Judy: While we're talking about that, it might be a good idea to bring an extra battery pack for your phone in case you need it for an emergency. As Carol said, make sure that you're packing lightly and for that life raft situation, just what you need.

Keith: What are some other ways you could prepare for disasters or emergencies, other tips and resources you can provide?

Judy: One thing I like to tell folks is it's nice to print out some photos of your home, and your belongings, and the papers that Carol mentioned earlier -- your birth certificate, insurance papers, Social Security card.

Then save a copy of that on email and send it to a friend who's out of state or a family member so you have a copy of that after the disaster.

Keith: Interesting.

Judy: There are all kinds of websites that can help you with what to pack, what to think about, how to prepare. I guess we can put some of that on your website. Can we not?

Carol: There is already a list on our website under the resources about what to bring to a shelter, some suggestions.

Keith: There's a direct link to that, too. You can go to disabilityrightsflorida.org/disasterprep. That's all one word, disasterprep. That'll take you to our Disaster and Emergency Planning page, which has these resources that Carol's referring to.

Carol: I may want to edit that a little bit because I've learned a lot of helpful little hints from Judy over the last several days.

Judy: Likewise. Something else that somebody brought up today was that you might want to make sure that you have everything packed in a box or a bag if you are staying in your own home, but somewhere where you can reach it if the electricity should go out.

Make sure you have extra batteries. I can't stress that enough.

Keith: That makes a lot of sense. I can see that being commonly overlooked.

Carol: You never know how long the power is going to be off.

Judy: Another thing to think about is, if the power fails either at home or in a shelter and we don't expect it to, but it would be nice to have an inexpensive battery-operated hand fan, something small that you can use to cool yourself off and your pet.

Keith: That makes sense.

Carol: Judy, you did mention earlier, too, that in your case, you have a blanket because you tend to get cold easily.

When you go into the shelter, you're not quite sure what linens are going to be available, or blankets. Have a small blanket that's your favorite or something packed into your kit.

Judy: That's a great idea, Carol, because I noticed that it can double up as a pillow. It can be something to put under your feet. If you have a service animal, it might be something they recognize the smell of. Always be prepared is, basically, what we're talking about.

Thinking ahead, "Is it going to be cold in the shelter? Is it going to be warm in the shelter?" Be prepared. Pack lightly so that you can manage everything you're bringing, but be thorough.

Carol: Other than our website, most of the resources are listed on there with links to floridadisaster.org, which is the Division of Emergency Management's website.

I also wanted to mention quickly, too, that in regard to your medications, if you have insurance coverage that only allows you to get refills every 30 days, there is a statute that states that, if there is a declared disaster by the governor, the pharmacies are notified that you can refill your prescriptions early.

This allows for you to be able to take a good supply to the shelter with you.

Keith: That's very important and good to know. Judy and Carol, thank you so much for being my guests today and telling our listeners about the Special Needs Registry and Special Needs Shelters.

Again, for more on this subject, for a list of links and resources, go to our website, our Disaster and Emergency Planning page at disabilityrightsflorida.org/disasterprep.

While you're there, please also complete our 2018 Planning Survey at disabilityrightsflorida.org/survey.

Thanks again, Judy and Carol. I really appreciate it.

Carol: Thank you.

Judy: Thanks, Keith.

Keith: Thank you to everyone for listening to the You First Podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

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Keith: The You First Podcast is produced by Disability Rights Florida, a not-for-profit corporation working to protect and advance the rights of Floridians with disabilities through advocacy and education.

If you or a family member has a disability and feel your rights have been violated in some way, please contact Disability Rights Florida.

You can learn more about the services we provide, explore a vast array of resources on a variety of disability-related topics, and complete an online intake on our website at www.disabilityrightsflorida.org. You can also call us at 1-800-342-0823.

Thank you for listening to You First - The Disability Rights Florida Podcast.

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