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Delaware forums stress planning for emergencies

Focus is on disabled, elderly, children, those with other special needs

BY KIM HOEY • SPECIAL TO THE NEWS JOURNAL • AUGUST 26, 2010

Dennis McIlvain remembers the 1994 ice storm when he was without electricity for more than a week. While some people left to stay in shelters, McIlvain, as a quadriplegic, figured the shelters would be a worse situation than he had at home.

"Hospitals aren't set up to take care of me. How would a shelter?" asked McIlvain.

Today, he makes sure he has at least a 10-day supply of food and medications at his house at all times, ready to ride out a disaster at home. So he was surprised when members of the Delaware Emergency Preparedness Forum told him to start thinking about where he could go if he had to.

McIlvain, of Milford, was taking part in a series of four forums held throughout the state to help people with disabilities or special needs be better prepared in the case of an emergency. Surprising to many was that special needs included all children and elderly, and that an emergency didn't have to be a natural disaster like a hurricane or a snowstorm. Any loss of electricity puts people at danger.

"Fear of being out of power traumatizes people," said Robert Stuart, a participant in the Sussex County Forum and Sussex County EMS director.

September is Emergency Preparedness Month nationally.

Since that is also the time when hurricanes are more likely to roll through Delaware, the presenters hoped participants and people they talked to would soon start preparing for emergencies.

Forum topics included: Why people with special needs need to put a little more effort into their emergency plan, how they will get medication they need, where they will get care, where they can go and how they will learn about an emergency were all topics at the forums, which were sponsored by the University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Studies and Citizens Corps, Delaware Disabilities Council and the Inclusive Preparedness Center.

"The key to successful preparation really starts at the local level, not just at the local government level, but at the local citizen level," said Kurt Reuther, a homeland security advisor who helps facilitate the discussions.

Several speakers emphasized the importance of the personal level of emergency management. Often in emergencies it ends up that neighbors, friends and acquaintances are the first line of defense. Taking ownership of being prepared and being ready to help others was stressed to participants of the workshops.

"When the government says we need to follow certain directions, we need to be able to act," said Pat Heineman, project coordinator for the Inclusive Preparedness Center, housed in the Delaware Emergency Management Agency.

Preparedness experts recommended having copies of all important documents, including prescriptions, together in a watertight bag, as well as extra batteries, non-perishable food and water -- to name a few of the items needed. They also spoke of low-tech options for helping responders to find people in need, such as keeping an old non-electric land line phone for making phone calls, having a red piece of paper to put in a front window to let people know you need help, setting up places you can go and people you can call to use as meeting spots if members of the household are not together.

But none of it will work if people do not start the process before an emergency occurs. Sometimes people become anxious talking about preparing for an emergency, but a little time now can save a lot of stress later.

"Trust me, you won't have time to get your important papers together in an emergency," said Robert George, program manager for the Citizen Corps, FEMA's grassroots strategy to bring together government and community leaders to involve citizens in all-hazards emergency preparedness and resilience.

People should start thinking what the five most important things they would put in their emergency box and start gathering the supplies today, said the presenters.

As for Dennis McIlvain, he left with some new plans to put in place and an appreciation for all the people willing to help those in need.

"I'm just glad I live in a country that cares," he said.

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TO LEARN MORE

An emergency "go" kit should include bottled water, energy food bars and a radio/flashlight that does not require batteries.

To find out more information about emergency preparedness education and training opportunities through the Delaware Emergency Management Agency call (877) SAY-DEMA (in state) or 659-2243. Websites to visit include www.delawarecitizenscorps.org, www.dema.delaware.gov and www.prepareDE.org.



Al Piombino, project coordinator for the Center for Disabilities Studies at the University of Delaware, shows some of the items recommended for an emergency "go" kit. (The News Journal/GARY EMEIGH)



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