



Survival Coalition

of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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American Association on Mental Retardation, WI Chapter • AARP– WI • Arc Dane County • Arc Wisconsin Disability Association • Autism Society of Southwestern Wisconsin • Brain Injury Association of Wisconsin • Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups • Community Alliance Providers of Wisconsin • Disability Rights Wisconsin • Easter Seals-Kindcare, Inc. • Epilepsy Foundation – South Central • Family Voices • Grassroots Empowerment Project • Hearthstone • Independence First • Independent Living Council of Wisconsin • Independent Living Resources • Learning Disabilities Association of WI • Mental Health Association of Milwaukee County • Midstate Independent Living Consultants • NAMI Wisconsin, Inc. • National Multiple Sclerosis Society, WI Chapter • Opportunities, Inc. • Options in Community Living • People First Wisconsin, Inc. • Rehabilitation for Wisconsin, Inc. • Residential Services Association of Wisconsin • Respite Care Association of Wisconsin • Service Employees International Union Local 150 • Society's Assets, WI • The Steinhauer Group • United Cerebral Palsy–WCW • Waisman Center • Wisconsin ADAPT • Wisconsin Coalition for Independent Living Centers • Wisconsin Council on Children and Families • Wisconsin Council on Developmental Disabilities • Wisconsin Council on Physical Disabilities • Wisconsin FACETS • Wisconsin Occupational Therapy Association

November 22, 2006

Representative Joan Ballweg, Chair
Special Committee on Disaster Preparedness Planning
Wisconsin Legislative Council
One East Main Street, Suite 401
P.O. Box 2536
Madison, WI 53701-2536

Dear Representative Ballweg,

We represent the Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations and the Wisconsin Personal Services Association (WPSA).. The Survival Coalition is a large disability advocacy organization in the state, with about 50 member organizations. WPSA is the largest association representing providers in the personal services care sector. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Since February 2002 the Survival Coalition and WPSA have been participating and advocating with state and county public health and human services committees to educate government planners, health and human service provider organizations and people with disabilities about the issues surrounding disaster planning, mitigation, response and recovery. We believe that the collective awareness of many of the issues people with disabilities face has improved through this effort, but implementation of most the planning and education still needs to be accomplished.

Addressing the needs of people with disabilities during a disaster presents special challenges. Needs are diverse; places of residence are community based and thus more isolating than institutional long term care; cultural and language barriers adds another layer of challenges for planners; and medical needs have to be met.

We have identified these major disability issues and related disaster processes which still need attention:

- 1) Communication – our state demographics require that our public safety notices be more than only English-based oral or scroll messages from the TV, radio and newspapers. Communication avenues must be multi-dimensional such as access to the deaf and hard of hearing through captioning, scrolls, beeper and computer alerts. Our communication efforts must have the capacity to be multi-lingual in translation and interpretation.

And further, our communication efforts must be understandable to people with cognitive disabilities such as for those with Alzheimer's and Developmental Disabilities. A secondary communication system has been very successful in other states. For instance, in New York City officials use 411 as their secondary system to allow people to get information about incident event government directives, to receive assistance on what actions to take and to access multi-language interpretation and translation services. Wisconsin awarded a grant for the 211 phone system to go statewide and be the secondary communication system, but it is not fully functional or well known to the disability community at this point.

2) Transportation – Certainly transportation has had much more scrutiny with the urban evacuation planning this year, but we believe that local, county and regional planners have much to do to secure the intra and inter-government agreements as well as the public-private agreements necessary to accommodate the thousands of people with disabilities who require specialized accessible transportation. Transportation may be to attend mass public health clinics, go to a special needs shelter, or be evacuated.

And again disability-sensitive communication methods are essential to people with disabilities through alternate means and secondary systems, and that are also culturally and language sensitive. Without these systems people with disabilities will be unable to comply with the government directives to transport them to safety.

3) Evacuation – Mass urban evacuation planning has been a priority in Wisconsin this last year, but the attention to having specialized accessible transportation, disability sensitive communication and special needs sheltering during and after the evacuation still needs to be more adequately addressed.

4) Special Needs Sheltering – To our knowledge there are no designated special needs shelters in Wisconsin. The American Red Cross does not operate special needs shelters – only mass shelters. Since 2002 the Survival Coalition and WPSA have been trying to raise this issue to priority status. We advocate that county and regional planners assess the need and secure the agreements necessary for fully accessible local and regional special needs shelters that have medical personnel, medical equipment, and generated electricity for ventilators and oxygen for instance, heat and cooling capacity to relieve the inevitable surge of people with disabilities on our local and regional emergency medical systems without the special needs shelters in place.

5) Disaster Education and Planning - We also advocate continuing the public/private education efforts with government planners, healthcare and human service providers, people with disabilities and their families to be individually and collectively prepared and active in the local and regional planning processes.

We look to your leadership to assure that the needs of people with disabilities will not be overlooked and that resources be earmarked specifically to help this segment of our population. In addition, we hope that during your remaining hearings you regularly inquire of your invited guests about plans for special populations when appropriate.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Please write us directly or consider an invitation to participate in your next Legislative Council hearing.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit our concerns and position.

Respectfully,

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cc: Survival Coalition Members