



AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH - DISASTER PREPAREDNESS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM AND THEIR FAMILIES

The New Jersey Office of Emergency Management, in partnership with The Noah's Ark Institute, encourages families and supporters of individuals on the Autism Spectrum to prepare for emergencies and disasters.

Below are links to basic Family Disaster Preparedness Information and tools.

www.ready.gov

www.ready.nj.gov

Register Ready – NJ's Special Needs Registry for Disasters – www.registerready.nj.gov –

NJ Alert – www.njalert.gov

As you read the information contained in these websites, we remind you that the characteristics of disasters – they can be unpredictable, dangerous and dynamic – bring specific concerns for individuals with autism and their families. Some of these characteristics are:

Change – After a disaster, the physical environment – your home, your neighborhood and other familiar places can be altered significantly. It is important to anticipate this and extra effort may be needed to help all family members feel safe through the process of disaster response and recovery. Preparedness and talking about it is one way to mitigate the stressful impacts that change can bring.

Communication - For those on the autism spectrum, disaster communication can be particularly challenging. Emergency responders may or may not immediately recognize that a person has autism, or they may have varying levels of experience in dealing with it. In NJ, first responders are now required to complete awareness level training on working with individuals with developmental disabilities during emergency responses. A card or information sheet about how to best interact with your family member is a good tool to have on hand during emergencies, when many community members all need help at the same time.

Evacuation – The NJ OEM supports the efforts of our Red Cross partners regarding mass care operations. However a mass care shelter environment can be noisy and chaotic. Think about alternatives to mass care shelters, if you need to evacuate. Staying with a family member or friend might be a better alternative, depending on your loved one's level of functioning.

"Go-Bags" – The websites listed above contain information about disaster supplies and emergency go-bags. Individuals on the autism spectrum might consider additions to their go-bag. Some examples are medications or copies of prescriptions, an information card about how to best interact with your loved one, contact numbers for physicians, therapists, personal care assistants and special comfort items. Parents should make sure they have a copy of their child's IEP and or behavioral plan, in a water tight bag if possible; in a long-term evacuation and recovery situation, this will be difficult to replicate.

Web resources – disasters and people with autism:

http://www.autism.com/ind_disasterprep.asp

<http://www.monarchcenterforautism.org/safety/disaster-preparedness-tips-autism>

<http://wwwstatic.kern.org/gems/kernautism/DisasterPreparednessTipsforF.pdf>

Being involved with emergency planning is important for all. If you have a loved one with a disability, including autism, it is essential to pre plan for safe outcomes in the event there is an emergency.

Autism is often difficult to manage. In an emergency or disaster situation, being prepared, as much as possible, ahead of time will make that situation easier to manage for everyone.

During autism awareness month let's make an effort to be proactive in emergency preparedness planning.