

THE HONORABLE TOM RIDGE

First Secretary of Homeland Security and now Chair of the National Organization on Disability (NOD)

In his own words...

In 2004, NOD's Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI) conducted a survey of emergency managers and learned that more than 76 percent of emergency managers in this country do not have a paid expert on staff to deal with issues surrounding disability preparedness. More than 73 percent of the emergency managers said that no funding had been received to address these issues. The most dramatic example is the authorization by Congress of a National Disability Coordinator in the post-Katrina Reform Act of 2006. The dollars have not yet been found to fill the position.



The good news is that grant guidance for Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) dollars and other grant opportunities available to emergency managers have begun to shift their guiding language to include special needs populations. The FY07 grant guidance issued by DHS requires that planning for the special needs population be addressed.

What we still need, though, is a standardized definition of "special needs," since some special needs populations are not adequately identified during times of disaster. We saw this issue come to light during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

On June 15, 2006, the Department of Homeland Security issued findings from a national assessment of the country's catastrophic planning capabilities.

The Review found that while most

of the country is reasonably well prepared to handle a disaster situation, certain areas (e.g., evacuation, command structure, resource management and attention to populations with special needs) were in need of significant attention. However, progress is being made with the rewriting of the National Response Plan (NRP) and National Incident Management System (NIMS). There is also progress being made with the State and Local Guide for Emergency Management, which will include more information on addressing special needs issues in emergency planning.

Again, much progress has been made, but there is always more to do. Results of the Nationwide Plan Review conducted in the spring of 2006 confirm that no large urban metropolitan area or state has adequate emergency plans in place to address issues for special needs populations. My hope is that states can determine ways to fund a special needs preparedness coordinator within their state emergency management agency. That expertise is needed not only for state-level operations, but also needs to be available to the local jurisdictions for support and guidance on special needs issues.

When a jurisdiction plans exercises of any kind, representatives from the special needs community should be involved in the planning of the exercise and in providing volunteers to participate in the exercise as mock-victims with disabilities. These training exercises help everyone involved recognize issues before an incident occurs.

Additionally, establishing special needs task forces to work through these planning issues will help empower the advocates to become part of the emergency management process. This idea can transcend into the private

sector and the workplace as well. If an employer is trying to create evacuation and emergency plans for their specific facility, representation of these issues is critical to their effectiveness.

It would be extremely valuable if the Homeland Security Appropriations Committees of both the Senate and the House considered continuing funding for the EPI program. NOD established the Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI) program following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. It remains the only cross-disability organization with a fully dedicated emergency preparedness program and the only organization with personnel experienced in emergency management and disability issues.

Both the emergency management community and the advocacy community recognize that there is a problem. But both communities need more understanding of the issues that one another face – in terms of funding, expertise, disability culture, realities of disasters and emergency situations.

These problems existed long before Katrina and Rita and pre-date 9/11. There is a vast cadre of first responders that don't have expertise with special needs issues, and conversely there is a large portion of special needs experts that don't have operational experience in disaster management. Until there is funding allocated for the education of emergency managers, special needs advocates and issues of individual preparedness, as well as funding for positions within the agencies leading the change and policy shift, then awareness cannot advance as fully and quickly as necessary.

Also, we need to assist those with disabilities, or their friends and family members, to help them with their own personal preparedness. Over the last five years, Harris Poll surveys commissioned by EPI indicate that levels of personal preparedness for individuals with disabilities have not improved significantly over the past few years and they remain the most unprepared population in the country.

Additionally, during Hurricane Katrina, EPI deployed the first-ever rapid assessment team for disability issues into the Gulf to conduct assessments of shelter situations and operational failures. We learned that more than 85 percent of community-based service providers for people with disabilities and senior citizens did not know how to access the emergency management system prior to the disaster. Knowledge really is power. In a crisis, it's critical. This is where the advocacy community can help play a vital role – in disseminating information and guidance to our most vulnerable citizens.

I would add that many people with disabilities are not passive consumers of help. They struggle, rather, with being acknowledged as active, engaged and innovative participants. They can be of great help to emergency planners – in making them more aware of both their strengths and their vulnerabilities when a disaster occurs.

More dollars for emergency planning efforts and more attention to the special needs community must combine quickly and appropriately to meet this need. That includes more training and better communication. So I'd like to see more integration of special needs coordinators into the emergency planning process and also during the execution and recovery phase of emergency planning.

In this country, we are all bound by the common thread of citizenship. We are joined as neighbors and communities, and we have a long history of looking out for one another. In times of crisis, we need to make sure that we do everything possible to look out for those who need extra assistance. As we continue to work together every day toward this goal, I'm confident that we will do just that.