



**US Department of Homeland Security (DHS)  
Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL)  
Listening Session Recap, Broward County  
April 26, 2018**

## **I. Introduction**

The Center for Independent Living of Broward hosted this listening session, which was held in Fort Lauderdale, FL. In attendance were representatives of non-governmental organizations, service providers, community members, and government partners. Introductory speakers included:

- Cameron Quinn, DHS Officer for CRCL
- Linda Mastandrea, Director, FEMA Office of Disability Integration and Coordination (ODIC)
- James Montgomery, Unit Chief, FEMA Civil Rights Program, FEMA Office of Equal Rights
- Regis Phelan, Acting Director, FEMA Office of Equal Rights
- Corey Hinds, Executive Director, Center for Independent Living of Broward
- Anna Hinken, DHS CRCL Moderator

The listening session began with Mr. Hind welcoming attendees and reviewing housekeeping rules for the session. Mr. Hinds introduced Officer Quinn who explained the purpose of the meeting. Officer Quinn explained that the purpose of the meeting was to hear about concerns and experiences related to the impact of the disaster had on individuals with disabilities and the surrounding areas. She asked that participants also share “what worked,” or effective practices. By better understanding these experiences, and in partnership with the state and local entities, including non-profit organizations, she noted that we can do more to improve preparedness, response, and recovery for persons with disabilities in time for the next hurricane season and other disasters.

Prior to opening up the session for participants to make comments, Officer Quinn introduced Ms. Linda Mastandrea, Mr. Regis Phelan, and Mr. Montgomery. Ms. Mastandrea and Mr. Phelan each provided a brief

overview of the activities of their respective offices with regard to individuals with disabilities and disaster-related activities.

## II. Issues/Concerns and Effective Practices Noted

### A. Communication Access for People with Disabilities

- **The Government<sup>1</sup> Should Have the Ability to Communicate with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing** – Community members reported that in the past, other cities within Florida (Miami-Dade) did not have interpreters during news segments about upcoming hurricanes. This time Miami-Dade did have interpreters and their person in charge of public affairs told the media that they should not take the camera off the interpreters since often the news camera will go to the speakers and not the interpreters. Later in the session, a community member said that ASL interpreters are needed for critically ill people who may be dependent on medical equipment so they can communicate their needs.
- **Media Outlets Need to Make Their Programming Accessible to the People who are Deaf** – One community member commented about the scroll that media outlets provide on the bottom of a screen, stating that the captions can't be seen on live news updates and often have typos. Another attendee commented that having ASL interpreters on camera is best.
  - Someone else brought up that recorded live programs need to be captioned as deaf people have jobs and some are not home during the day, and when they get home to watch a program that has been recorded, the caption is missing.
  - A community member brought up the idea of designating a TV channel for the deaf and hearing-impaired community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Government” or “Governments” as used in this document refers to federal, state, or local governments, depending upon which of these entities has a role or responsibilities in the area described.

- **The Government Needs to Make Improvements in its Emergency Notification Process** – A Hope Outreach Center representative reported that before a storm, the media focuses primarily on tracking the storm and other storm related details but does not provide concrete information that older adults and people with disabilities need to know.

## **B. Preparedness and Evacuation**

- **Governments Should Enhance Information Sharing to Improve Preparedness** – The Meals on Wheels representative talked about the need to share information about people who need assistance in the event of a hurricane. The Department of Elderly Affairs used to be able to provide information on people who need assistance in the event of a hurricane but they revised their system and are no longer able to do so. Additionally, the representative commented that people need to be contacted before a hurricane but there is no manpower or funding to prepare people in advance. There needs to be some type of preparatory collaboration between FEMA, the Red Cross, local municipalities, and others. Another attendee commented that a long-term recovery coalition in the area identified the need to keep track of persons who have disabilities and where they are located so they can be given attention in the event of another hurricane. Someone else remarked that this type of list is also needed for recovery efforts.
- **Governments Should Work Collaboratively with Local Counties and Communities to Improve Preparedness Planning for People with Disabilities** – An attendee commented that the county is addressing and working to ensure attention is given to people with disabilities. Municipalities are attempting to get people to identify themselves as needing special attention in the event of a hurricane so that municipalities will be able to identify additional shelter sites for those with “special needs”.
- **Governments Should Work Together to Ensure Funding is Available for Preparedness Planning throughout the Year** -- A representative of an organization that works with parents of children with disabilities reported that communication and preparing people for a disaster should be going on all year long but that there is no funding for it nor is there a priority for getting funding.

- **Governments Should Ensure Disaster Preparedness includes Helping People with Disabilities and their Pets** – A community member reported that there are lots of missing pets after a hurricane. People with disabilities don't want to leave their pets behind and are afraid of losing them so they will often consider their pets before they go to a shelter. The attendee commented that a safe place for pets also needs to be found
- **Governments should Ensure Accurate Contact Information is Available to Communities** -- One organization told us there was inaccurate contact information provided for the Red Cross and other agencies after the hurricane. People called the numbers given and were told they would need to be routed elsewhere. Additionally, the 2-1-1 number was overburdened with calls.

### C. Sheltering

- **Governments Need to Improve Shelter Planning for Persons with Medical Needs and Persons with Disabilities** -- An organization representative told us that during the hurricane she had fifteen very ill clients on ventilators, dialysis, and oxygen. She had gone to emergency medical evacuation planning meetings but she was told that since all of her fifteen clients are under an agency for people with disabilities, no hospital would take them in the event they could not be placed in a shelter. A county official later clarified that because an organization's clients have emergency management plans no hospital would take them and there was no recourse. Another representative said that her organization was aware of several individuals with disabilities who were in group homes who had to relocate several times in anticipation of the storm to different shelters or facilities and eventually had to leave the state to avoid the hurricane. Representatives also raised the issue of whether persons with disabilities needed to have support workers with them to enter "special needs" shelters. There were a lot of phone calls and emails right before the storm to place people in shelters and a better job needs to be done to prepare for individuals with disabilities entering shelters.
- **Shelter Providers Need to Provide Access for Individuals with Ventilators** -- A community member commented that it was very

dangerous having shelters that can't accommodate people with ventilators, especially seniors, and remarked that we all have to remember what happened in the nursing home close-by where a lot of elderly people ended up as fatalities because of Hurricane Irma. This should be a priority. These people can't wait because if "you can't breathe you will pass away quickly."

- **Governments Need to Provide Training for Shelter Staff** -- An organization representative commented that one of the biggest challenges is the lack of training of shelter staff. For example, people with autism and intellectual disabilities are unable to communicate effectively through speech and there is a significant lack of training among people who staff shelters in working with these individuals. According to the representative, we need to look at preparation of shelters a little more closely and see if additional resources can be provided to address some of these needs.
  
- **Governments Need to Improve Communication Infrastructure** --An organization representative said that since cell towers were down, internet access was also down or very slow at shelters. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals that rely on American Sign Language could not use video phones because they require high-speed internet access which was not available at the shelter due to internet access and power being out.
  - Another community member told us about staying at a shelter for two weeks and not being able to communicate with family because there was no internet access at the shelter and he needed to let his family know he was safe via Facebook. He remarked that internet access should be provided at shelters.
  
- **Shelter Providers Need to Provide Access to Charging Stations** -- An organization representative reported about her nonverbal clients who use communication technology that can only be powered for a few hours. If you have a number of people with these kinds of needs, you need more charging outlets within a shelter, so everyone can charge their equipment. Security of the equipment is also an issue. People don't want to leave their equipment and walk away since the power wheelchair or communication device can cost \$5,000. Advanced

preparation and power strips are needed for this type of issue in a shelter.

- **Governments Should Ensure there are No Gaps in Sheltering Requirements** -- A community member shared her story about sheltering with her partner. She said she has a disability and her partner has a birth defect and both require medical equipment. No “special needs” shelter would take them in since they would not allow same sex couples. The community member and her partner went to a hotel with all their medical equipment and had to pay out of pocket. Often if you are not 62 or over you don’t fit the requirements for programs to help families with disabilities. She told us that she wanted to share her story because there are gaps in services for people with disabilities and they need improvements. Her only options were a hotel or staying at home.
- **Shelter Providers Need to Be Better Prepared to Serve Individuals with Autism** -- An organization representative commented that she heard a lot about the light and noise levels for her clients with autism at shelters. That is an enormous issue, and when it becomes a behavioral challenge for people on the spectrum, they cannot cope because of the sensory processing issues that they have. Ultimately, this behavioral expression will impact everybody at the shelter, and so it is a much better idea for us all to figure out how to address these conditions beforehand.

#### **D. Access to FEMA Resources and Programs**

- **FEMA Should Enhance its Collaboration and Communication with Communities** -- A United Way representative commented that FEMA was really terrific and did an exceptional job trying to find resources for people as quickly as possible, however, local government, local non-profits, FEMA and the community need to have a better communication plan on how information is passed down, exchanged and shared. The United Way could have been more actively involved in recovery, if they had known there were people in hotels. Meals on Wheels has some information, FEMA has some pieces of information and the United Way has other pieces. Collectively, everyone has to leverage resources and through a communication plan, a better job could have been done. A community member also agreed that a better job needs to be done towards having cohesive communication channels between agencies

since she is on the phone constantly with these agencies and often they don't know what each other is doing.

- **FEMA Should Improve Access to its Information and Provide Alternatives for Individuals Who Do Not Have Access to the Internet** -- An organization representative told us that communication is a dilemma for seniors and while there is good communication between FEMA and organizations working on the ground, FEMA needs to do a better job of communication with seniors. FEMA can't just tell seniors to go to a website to apply for assistance. Seniors don't have the knowledge and sometimes there is no internet access or electricity after a hurricane. Agencies that work with seniors need to have a direct link to FEMA to tell them what works and doesn't work.
  
- **FEMA Should Improve Information about Whether Trailers Are Available to Communities** -- A community member asked where she might find information on FEMA trailers and whether there was something like that for families. A FEMA representative responded that yes there are trailers but that the state would have to request them. According to the FEMA representative, there are places where trailers will not be placed because they're flood zones, so they have to be placed inland. There are opportunities to have trailers placed on the locations where homes are located but that is a matter of state and local codes, and in some places, FEMA is not allowed to do that or the codes could be waived. The FEMA representative said that the best thing to do is to stay in touch with your county, which has a liaison with the federal government.
  
- **FEMA Should Improve Collaboration with Non-Profit Organizations** One organization representative reported that after the hurricane, both FEMA and the Red Cross got his cellphone number and would call him but it would be helpful to have complete and correct phone numbers for everyone before a storm comes through. Another representative commented that FEMA should collaborate with some of the local non-profits to make sure partnerships and relationships are developed beforehand and not during a storm so everyone knows who to call.

## **E. Services and Supports for Recovery**

- **Effective Practice: Innovation to Provide Computers and Charging Stations**- the Hope Outreach Center representative also talked about having a team of “communication” trailers just like blood bank trailers equipped with computers and charging stations for seniors, and people with disabilities to use. Another participant remarked that there would be a high demand for something like this.

## **III. Conclusion**

CRCL and FEMA thanked participants for sharing concerns and best practices and encouraged people to reach out after this meeting if they have additional concerns or questions that were not brought up during the session.