

# Disaster Mitigation for Persons with Disabilities: Fostering a New Dialogue

A report of The Annenberg Washington Program  
in collaboration with

**The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities**

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## Preface

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The Annenberg Washington Program provides a neutral forum, open to diverse opinion, for assessing the impact of communications technologies and public policies. This report bridges two of the Program's major areas of inquiry: communications policy in disaster relief and mitigation, and communications and disability policy.

As part of the examination of communications in times of disaster, the Program has worked to promote the effective use of communications technologies and policies to inform the public, save lives, and reduce suffering in the face of tragedy.

The Program first explored the link between communications and disaster mitigation just days after the world learned of the disaster at Chernobyl. Since then the Program has sponsored 10 major meetings and published [six reports](#) on the use of communications technologies and media to mitigate natural and complex disasters.

Beginning in 1990, The Annenberg Washington Program examined the role of communications policy in the implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Program has since published reports examining the employment provisions of the ADA; the pre and postADA employment practices at Sears, Roebuck and Company; and communications technology, inclusive education, and the ADA.

The President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is an independent federal agency established to facilitate the communication, coordination, and promotion of public and private efforts to enhance the employment of people with disabilities. The Committee provides information, training, and technical assistance to America's business leaders, organized labor, rehabilitation and service providers,

advocacy organizations, families, and individuals with disabilities. The President's Committee reports annually to the President on the progress and problems of maximizing employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The President's Committee recently signed a Statement of Understanding with the American Red Cross. The agreement outlines pro-active communications strategies between these organizations and helps establish a mechanism for providing disaster assistance to persons with disabilities. The President's Committee also provided the American Red Cross with computer listings of more than 9,000 disability advocates in the United States and its territories.

The Annenberg Washington Program and the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities share a long-standing commitment to using communications technology and policy to save lives and reduce human suffering in the face of disasters throughout the world. For too long people with disabilities have been excluded from this dialogue.

On the eve of the 10th anniversary of The Annenberg Washington Program's first meeting on disaster communications and the fifth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Program is delighted to publish *Disaster Mitigation for Persons with Disabilities: Fostering a New Dialogue*.

This collaborative report is meant to stimulate discussion of the issues and search for answers to problems. Although it is based on discussions with many people, it calls for much broader dialogue and research to address issues at the nexus of communications policy and disaster relief for persons with disabilities.

We are grateful to all the participants who have devoted themselves to this important task.

Newton N. Minow  
Director  
The Annenberg Washington Program

**Tony Coehlo**  
Chair  
President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities

## **The New Dialogue**

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Disasters change lives forever. For the 49 million Americans with disabilities, and millions of others around the world, surviving a disaster can be the beginning of a greater struggle. Whether an individual with a disability requires electricity to power a respirator, life sustaining medication, mobility assistance, or postdisaster recovery services, relief organizations and rescue personnel increasingly must be prepared to address the needs of that individual in the hours and days following a disaster.

As experts have long recognized, advance preparation is the key to mitigating the impact of both disasters and disabilities. This is the principle foundation of the United Nation's designation of the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction: with adequate knowledge and preparation, many of the harmful effects of disasters are avoidable. This same principle is central to the ADA: with education, planning, and reasonable accommodation, the impact of societal and attitudinal barriers facing people with disabilities can be reduced dramatically. In both cases, information is often the most valuable resource for effective mitigation.

Yet the important mitigation efforts of both the disaster and disability communities have all too often failed to intersect. The simple, often low cost steps that save lives and reduce property damage in the face of disasters have often overlooked the needs of people with disabilities. Similarly, efforts to accommodate disabled Americans frequently ignore disaster preparedness and response. As a result, too few disaster response officials are trained to deal effectively with people with disabilities, and too few disabled Americans have the knowledge that could help them save their own lives.

Leaders and experts within the disability community, members of relief organizations, media professionals, and local, state, and federal officials must establish a cooperative relationship to address this shortcoming. The challenges ahead will be overcome only by an ongoing dialogue among these and other groups.

That dialogue must, at a minimum, identify key issues concerning the needs of people with disabilities when disasters strike, develop effective strategies for resolving those issues, and build relationships and delineate responsibilities among disaster mitigation organizations, the media, and disabilities organizations.

Seven key principles should guide that dialogue.

## 1

**Accessible Disaster Facilities and Services.** Communications technology is vital for people with disabilities during a disaster to help assess damage, collect information,

and deploy supplies. Access to appropriate facilities -- housing, beds, toilets, and other necessities -- must be monitored and made available to individuals with disabilities before, during, and after a disaster. This access also must be ensured for those who incur a disability as a result of a disaster. Appropriate planning and management of information related to architectural accessibility improves the provision of disaster services for persons with disabilities.

## 2

**Accessible Communications and Assistance.** As communications technology and policy become more integral to disaster relief and mitigation, providing accessibility to the technology for people with disabilities becomes more essential. For example, people with hearing impairments require interpreters, TDD communications, and signaling devices. In addition, written materials must be produced on cassette tape, on CD-ROM, or in large print for people with visual impairments. People with cognitive impairments, such as those with developmental disabilities, Alzheimer's disease, or brain injury, require assistance to cope with new surroundings and to minimize confusion factors. It is crucial that people with disabilities help develop accessible communications and reliable assistance technologies.

## 3

**Accessible and Reliable Rescue Communications.** Accessible and reliable communications technology is critical to ensuring fast, effective, and competent field treatment of people with disabilities. Current satellite and cellular technology as well as personal communication networks permit communication in areas with a damaged or destroyed communication infrastructure. Communications technologies can assist field personnel in rescue coordination and tracking and can be combined with databases that house information on optimal treatment for particular disabilities or that track the allocation of postdisaster resources.

## 4

**Partnerships with the Media.** Many natural disasters can be predicted in advance. Disaster preparedness for people with disabilities is critical in minimizing the impact of a disaster. The media -- in partnership with disability and governmental organizations -- should incorporate advisories into emergency broadcasts in formats accessible to people with disabilities. Such advisories alert the public, provide a mechanism for informing rescue personnel of individual medical conditions and impairments, and identify accessible emergency shelters. The creation and repetition of accessible media

messages is critical for empowering people with disabilities to protect themselves from disasters.

## 5

**Partnerships with the Disability Community.** Disability organizations must join with relief and rescue organizations and the media to educate and inform their constituents of disaster contingency and self-help plans. A nationwide awareness effort should be devised and implemented to inform people with disabilities about necessary precautions for imminent disaster. In the event of a sudden natural disaster, such a program would minimize injury and facilitate rescue efforts. In addition, more young people with disabilities should be encouraged to study technology, medicine, science, and engineering as a way of gaining power over future technological advances in disaster relief and mitigation.

## 6

**Disaster Preparation, Education, and Training.** Communications technologies are crucial for educating the public about disaster preparedness and warning the people most likely to be affected. Relief and rescue operations must have the appropriate medical equipment, supplies, and training to address the immediate needs of people with disabilities. Affected individuals may require bladder bags, insulin pumps, walkers, or wheelchairs. Relief personnel must be equipped and trained in the use of such equipment. In addition, relief personnel should provide training, particularly for personnel and volunteers in the field, on how to support the independence and dignity of persons with disabilities in the aftermath of a disaster.

## 7

**Universal Design and Implementation Strategies.** Designing universal access into disaster relief plans, far from being a costly proposition, can pay off handsomely. As accessible communications tools become more widely available, their price will decrease. In addition, a universal design approach to meeting the needs of people with disabilities before and after a disaster will benefit many people without disabilities, such as the very young or the aged. A look at existing agreements among relief organizations and local, state, federal, and international governments will offer guidance in developing effective strategies for universal design and implementation plans. The federal government's role has yet to be defined, but it could encourage or even mandate universal design and set standards. For example, the federal government could provide guidelines for evacuation plans or pre-disaster warning periods.

## Conclusion

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These seven points reflect an emerging consensus about how best to respond to the needs of people with disabilities before, during, and after a disaster.

Additional dialogue and research are needed on emerging communications technology and policy issues, not only for people with disabilities, but for all underrepresented individuals in society -- the poor, the isolated, and the vulnerable.

Working together, the disability community, disaster relief agencies, and the media along with local, state, and federal governments can help minimize the high toll disasters exact.