

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS TIPS FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Living in the lovely, mild setting of the Pacific Northwest makes it easy to overlook the responsibility of being prepared for a disaster. Changing this “It’ll never happen here,” attitude and promoting disaster preparedness has become a priority for area governments as well as neighborhood groups who’ve rallied to the preparedness call.

The issue is important for every one of us. “Regardless of one’s ability to see, hear, or move around, we all need to sit down and plan for what may happen,” says John Vollmer, disaster preparedness public education coordinator for Washington State. The basics are the same for all of us and planning should follow these four steps:

Step One: Find out what disasters can happen in your area.

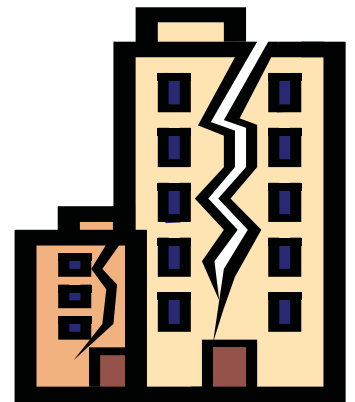
Step Two: Create a customized disaster plan.

Step Three: Put your plan into action.

Step Four: Practice and maintain your plan.

The Red Cross underscores **that knowing what to do is your best protection and your responsibility**. The Red Cross also advises you to prepare based on the capabilities and limitations you believe you will have after the disaster. Keep in mind that you may not be able to manage in your usual ways or rely on your usual support for some time after the event. Thinking about this in advance and planning how to manage under those circumstances will make it easier and less stressful.

Disaster preparedness takes a lot of work! The important thing is to get started — so do a little at a time, as your energy and budget permit. The more you do, the more confident you will be that you can take care of yourself when disaster strikes.



Ignorance is Not Bliss

Start by determining the disasters you need to prepare for and what systems are in place. Call your local office of emergency management and ask:

- What hazards exist in your community/area/region?
- What warning signals does the community use, and which radio and TV stations are assigned to the Emergency Alert System?
- Are there any provisions available for blind or partially sighted individuals to assist them in a disaster? (Some areas may have large-type, Braille or audiotape materials outlining local plans, and some areas maintain info on citizens with special needs so workers can respond accordingly.)
- If you have a dog guide, are there options for animal care after a disaster? (The Red Cross shelters normally allow dog guides into shelters, but will not allow other pets. Some neighborhoods have designated locations where pets can be cared for).



You should also ask about the disaster plan at your local senior or community center, your church, your workplace or other places you frequent.

Personal Planning Counts

Next, meet with the people you live with, family or friends, and discuss your special needs, the disasters that are most likely to happen and a plan for what you would do in each case. Ask an out-of-area friend to be your check-in contact (it is often easier to call long distance following a disaster) and designate a disaster buddy close by.

Action Follows Planning

- Learn how and when to turn off the water and gas mains and know where the electrical panel is, and be sure others in your home know as well.
- Mark switches so you can clearly identify them and work them correctly. You may want to develop large-print, tactile or Braille labels and instructions.
- Purchase and learn how to use ABC-type fire extinguishers.
- Consider a sprinkler system.
- Install smoke detectors, especially near bedrooms and change the battery regularly.
- Place security lights along paths of travel. These lights plug into wall outlets and light automatically if there is a loss of power. Depending on type, they shine for 1 to 6 hours.
- Store flashlights with wide beams and extra batteries throughout your home.

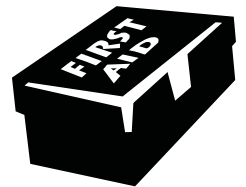
Conduct a hazard hunt. **This is probably one of the most important steps for a blind or**

partially sighted person. The idea is to minimize the alteration of pathways by securing water heaters, washers, dryers, stoves, refrigerators, bookcases and other heavy objects to the wall so that they do not block your exit during or following an earthquake.

Post emergency phone numbers near your phone and in your purse or wallet. You may want to create a large-print list, Braille list or an audiotape with recorded numbers. Teach children and grandchildren how and when to call 911 for emergency help.

Create a Custom Survival Kit

Stock a disaster survival kit with supplies for at least three days. Optimally, prepare a kit for home and a portable kit for evacuation. Each kit should contain the following:



- Three gallons of water per person
- Canned food and opener
- Prescription and non-prescription medications, a well-stocked first aid kit, sanitation supplies, extra clothing and bedding.
- Food for your Guide Dog or any other pets
- Include a whistle or horn so you can attract attention, if needed.

The **Red Cross** also recommends the following if you are blind or visually impaired:

- Mark all your preparedness supplies with tactile glue such as Hi-Marks, large-print labels or Braille
- Include a talking, large-type or tactile clock with extra batteries
- Have at least one extra white cane
- Include extra magnifiers
- Include an extra pair of glasses and/or sunshields
- Write down your medical/medication needs and a brief note about your visual impairment and make copies for your kits and your purse or wallet

You do not have to put the kits together all at once. First, determine what you already have. Then each week or month, add a few items. As an alternative, note that you can purchase basic kits that include a three-day supply of food, water, basic first aid items and a blanket. If you have pets, prepare a similar kit for them. Keep in mind that disasters traumatize animals. Having a pet container will allow you to secure your animal until you have a chance to calm it down or have it cared for.

An Ongoing Process – Practice and Update

Review your plan every **six months** so you and the others involved remember what to do. Check all supplies and batteries. Also—this is especially important if you travel a lot—be sure to let people know if you are going out of town so they won't worry about finding you if a disaster strikes while you're gone. "No one should feel inadequate because they rely on someone else to help them prepare for emergencies or disasters," says Vollmer. "When disaster strikes we will all be working to help one another."

Websites with tips and information

<http://www.disabilitypreparedness.gov/>

<http://www.ready.gov/america/getakit/disabled.html>

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster/>

<http://www.epa.gov/naturalevents/>

For more information

- Contact your local emergency management department (do not call 911!). Ask directory assistance for the general contact number) and your local Red Cross.
- Visit the Red Cross online at www.redcross.org/services where there are numerous materials about preparedness for people with disabilities.
- To organize a neighborhood preparedness strategy in the Seattle area, contact the coordinating office of Seattle Disaster Aid and Response Teams (SDART) at (206) 233-7123.
- If you live within Skagit, Snohomish or King County and want help marking items in your home to help you prepare, please contact CSBPS at (206) 525-5556 or (800) 458-4888.

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Email: csbps@csbps.com

Website: www.csbps.com

Adaptive Aids Store: www.SightConnection.com

Agency hours: 8 AM – 5 PM, M-F

SightConnection Store hours: 9 AM - 5 PM, M-F

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