

## Disasters don't plan ahead, but you can

September is National Preparedness Month and South Heartland District Health Department is joining other planning agencies across the nation to encourage emergency planning with the theme "Disasters don't plan ahead. You can."

When you are going to do something, regardless of how big or small the task, you make a plan. It may not be formally written down and it may exist only in your mind, but you still have a plan to accomplish what you want to do. That's how it gets done. Planning for disasters is no different, but the need to have it written down for everyone in your family to see and be familiar with can save time and lives.

We hope your plan will never be used, but the plan is the key step toward preparedness. Be sure your plan includes yourself, your family, and friends. Plan to help your neighbor and your community, then practice and build out your plans.

Communication is the key to a successful plan. Everyone in your family should know your emergency plan, including what to do, where to go, and how to contact other members of the family. Make sure you have a second person to call if you can't reach the first person and where to meet if you should lose contact with each other. Practice your plan to make sure it works. Don't let a failure to communicate cause problems for your family in a disaster.

When helping to make plans for your community's preparedness, be sure you include members of any vulnerable populations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests that vulnerable populations might include those members of your community who are economically disadvantaged, those with language and literacy challenges, those with medical issues and disabilities (physical, mental, cognitive, or sensory), those who may be isolated (cultural, geographic, or social isolation), and those who are very young or very old.

Your community can develop a COIN (Community Outreach Information Network, COIN)—a grassroots network of people and trusted leaders who can help with emergency response planning and delivering information to at-risk and vulnerable populations before, during and after emergencies. By doing this, you become a part of something larger.

Planning, communication, practicing plans, helping your neighbors and community, including at-risk populations, are all part of being prepared from the smallest to the largest level. Remember that "Winging it" is not an Emergency Plan. Being prepared for the worst, and making sure others in your family and neighborhood do the same, is an Emergency Plan that can save lives.

Making a kit of items that would be useful during a disaster, especially in a power outage, is something you can work on over a period of time. Be sure to include medications and items for your pets as well. When thinking about the immediate danger of a tornado, make sure you have a plan for where you will go as your "safe place" – and remember to shut off the water main and

gas valves so they don't create an additional danger if they are damaged. Make sure you have your emergency kit accessible at that location. In our household, we have designated our basement as a safe place and we keep football helmets in the basement for our grandchildren to wear in case of a tornado.

Fortunately, people in our four counties often take a community approach to disaster response, taking care of others in addition to their own families. In meeting with disaster victims, we found that most people watched out for their neighbors and checked on them to assure their safety. After the tornado in Roseland, friends stopped at houses where they knew there were individuals who might be more vulnerable to make sure they reached safety. After the tornado in Sutton, South Heartland helped complete "well checks" in the senior housing communities to provide recovery information and find out what people needed.

In responding to disasters, South Heartland has found that some of the trauma of a disaster event may not appear until the days following the disaster, once the damage is assessed and cleanup is mostly completed. Forming groups like a COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disasters) is a big help. Edgar is a good example of how a COAD can be beneficial during any event. Almost all of their members have taken Psychological First Aid or Mental Health First Aid training to help community members cope with the stresses, as well as physical needs, that can come with a disaster. Contact South Heartland District to find out how you or a group in your community can complete one of these classes. Being prepared includes being prepared for mental health stresses as well as physical trauma.

Emergency Preparedness is a community action. Everyone needs to get involved for everyone else's sake. Preparedness goes beyond the walls of your own house. Preparedness stretches into the neighborhood and community. Do your best to help in this effort - take one step this September to help your family and your community be better prepared!

Contact South Heartland District Health Department for suggestions, resources and training opportunities.

*Jim Morgan is the public health risk coordinator for South Heartland District Health Department, serving Adams, Clay, Nuckolls and Webster counties in Nebraska. He may be reached at 877-238-7595.*