

DEVELOPING A FAMILY DISASTER PLAN

Disaster can strike quickly and without warning. It can force you to evacuate your neighborhood or confine you to your home. Where will your family be when disaster strikes? They could be anywhere - at work, at school or in the car. How will you find each other? Will you know if your children are safe?

Families can and do cope with disaster by preparing in advance and working together as a team. Knowing what to do is your best protection and your responsibility. The National Weather Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the American Red Cross urge each and every family to develop a family disaster plan. The key to preparedness is having a plan. Here are the steps to follow to create and implement a family disaster plan:

- Gather information about hazards in your area by contacting your local chapter of the American Red Cross, your county emergency management or the National Weather Service. Find out what types of disasters could occur in your area and how you should respond. Learn your community's warning signals and evacuation plans. Also, find out about the disaster plans at your workplace, your children's school and other places where your family spends time.
- Meet with your family to create a plan. Discuss the information you have gathered and why it is important to prepare for disaster. Plan to share responsibilities and work together as a team.
- It is a good idea to pick two places to meet: right outside your home in case of a sudden emergency, like a fire, and outside your neighborhood in case you cannot return home. Everyone, including small children, should know your address and phone number.
- Ask an out-of-state friend to be your "family contact" for everyone to call if the family gets separated. After a disaster, it is often easier to call long distance.
- Have a plan for your pets - be aware that pets are not allowed in American Red Cross shelters. Other arrangements should be secured beforehand.
- Once you have created a family disaster plan, it is time to implement the plan so that it may be activated at any point in time. Post emergency telephone numbers by phones (fire, police, ambulance, etc.). Teach your children how and when to call 911. Have your family learn basic safety measures, such as CPR and First Aid. Show each family member 1) how and when to turn off water, gas and electricity at the main switches, and 2) how to use a fire extinguisher. Conduct a home hazard hunt in which you inspect your home for items that can move, fall, break or cause a fire, and correct them. Stock emergency supplies and assemble a Disaster Supplies Kit (see below). Determine the best escape routes

from your room and find the safe spots in your home for different types of disasters.

Disaster Supplies Kit

Your kit should include enough supplies to meet your needs for at least three days. Store these supplies in sturdy, easy to carry, water-resistant containers, such as backpacks or duffle bags. It is a good idea to keep a smaller kit in the trunk of your car. Your disaster supplies kit should include:

- A three-day supply of water (one gallon per person per day) and food that will not spoil
- One change of clothing and footwear per person
- One blanket or sleeping bag per person
- A first aid kit, including prescription medicines
- Emergency tools, including a battery-powered radio, flashlight and plenty of extra batteries
- An extra set of car keys
- Cash
- Special items for infant, elderly or disables family members
- An extra pair of glasses

Practice and maintain your plan. Ask questions to make sure your family remembers meeting places, phone numbers and safety rules. Conduct drills. You want to replace stored water every three months and stored food every six months. Test and recharge your fire extinguisher according to manufacturer's instructions. Smoke alarms should be checked monthly and batteries changed at least once a year.

Something else to keep in mind is the value of neighbors during a difficult time. Working with neighbors can save lives. Why not meet with your neighbors to plan how the neighborhood could work together after a disaster until help arrives? If you are a member of a neighborhood organization, introduce disaster preparedness as a new activity. Know your neighbors special skills and consider how you could help neighbors who have special needs, such as disabled and elderly persons. Make plans for child care in case parents cannot get home - that way, all of the children in your neighborhood can be safe.