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## **DISABILITY RIGHTS IN NATURAL DISASTERS AND PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES**

Under both the Rehabilitation Act (Rehab Act) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), government entities have a legal obligation to provide equal access to emergency services to people with disabilities. These laws apply in natural disasters as well as public health emergencies like a pandemic. When they receive or distribute federal funds, private entities assume similar legal obligations under the Rehab Act and may also have obligations under the ADA and other disability rights laws regardless of whether or not federal funds are involved.

Unfortunately, compliance with the ADA and Rehab Act is often overlooked or sidelined in the middle of natural disasters or public health emergencies. This can manifest itself in a variety of ways from public shelters that are inaccessible to people with mobility impairments, to failure to include sign language interpreters in public service announcements of approaching storms, to denial of personal care attendants in hospital settings. Bias against people with disabilities can have particularly egregious consequences when crisis standards of care are adopted that discriminate against those with disabilities based on faulty assumptions about the utility of lifesaving treatments applied to them.

### **Why Is This Important to Veterans with Disabilities and Their Families?**

While the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides some aid to veterans affected by major disasters, veterans and their families still have to rely on the broader emergency and public health management systems for many things necessary to their survival and recovery. Just like people with disabilities, veterans with disabilities and their families can encounter barriers to getting assistance in preparing for, managing through, and recovering from natural disasters and other emergencies. PVA members were faced with inaccessible bathrooms at shelters during Hurricane Harvey, difficulties locating housing in the wake of California wildfires, and problems obtaining assistance with food and other necessities after Hurricane Maria.

### **What Resources Exist to Help Veterans and Other People with Disabilities in Emergency Planning, Response, and Recovery?**

Being ready for disasters is an important step for all people to take and many resources exist to help people with disabilities prepare for emergencies and to know where to turn for assistance if problems arise.

VA offer some assistance to veterans and their families through its medical centers during natural disasters. The **VA Office of Emergency Management** has developed a [list of resources](#) available to veterans and notes that “spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, and home bound Veterans in need of assistance should anticipate being contacted by a VA representative.” Other VA websites provide



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[additional information about VA disaster assistance](#) and [guidance on VA policy governing home loans for veteran borrowers affected by natural disasters](#).

**Paralyzed Veterans of America** has established a [website](#) devoted to information about services and assistance available to members and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. On that site can be found information about reaching PVA National Service Officers, tips for caregivers, mental health resource guides, and VA SCI/D Center policies during this public health emergency.

**United Spinal Association** has developed a [tool kit](#) that offers guidance about evacuating to shelters, what to do about service animals, managing during power outages, and videos about disaster preparation and recovery.

The **Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies** operates a hotline that is active 365 days a year, 24 hours a day that can provide information and referrals for help during natural disasters. The hotline promises a response to calls within 24 hours and can be reached at (800) 626-4959. More information about the work of the Partnership can be found at [www.disasterstrategies.org](http://www.disasterstrategies.org).

The network of Protection and Advocacy (P&A) agencies has become active in protecting the rights of people with disabilities during disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic. The **National Disability Rights Network** has a [website](#) that offers information about P&A assistance, informational webinars and podcasts, and other resources helpful to people with disabilities during disasters, fires, and public health emergencies.

**The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)** has a Civil Rights Resource Line to ensure survivors and members of the public will have access to Civil Rights Advisors for civil rights questions, complaints, and requests for reasonable accommodations when receiving any FEMA services. The contact information for this office is: <https://www.fema.gov/about/offices/equal-rights/civil-rights> or 833-285-7448. Additional information about the work of FEMA's Office of Equal Rights can be found [here](#).