



# EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

## Hurricane Preparedness for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

### Preparing and setting up shelters and educating staff & volunteers

Hurricane preparedness for Florida residents has many similarities across communities and individuals. However, several specific needs of individuals with autism spectrum disorders should also be planned for to ensure success. This information has been compiled to assist emergency response staff and volunteers in supporting individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

#### Clear designation as staff:

Individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities may have difficulty distinguishing shelter staff from “strangers.” In times of emergency, a variety of individuals may be thrown together under chaotic circumstances providing predators with opportunity to take advantage of vulnerable individuals or families.

By having clear identification as staff, you can help families and shelter residents to identify individuals capable of assisting them. Consider using an “on duty” staff list that includes the staff names, photos, and duties. At a minimum, badges should be worn by all personnel. Identifying hats, t-shirts, or bracelets can also help individuals distinguish staff as individuals who can assist them.

#### Clear designation of individuals who have limited communication:

Individuals with limited communication should have some form of identification on them at all times during their stay at a shelter. Identification can be worn on lanyards, badges, etc. Information should include the individual’s name, parent or caregiver contact information, and critical medical needs including allergies.

#### Environmental Modifications:

Individuals with autism or other developmental disabilities may be sensitive to new people, situations, or places. Because they can express this sensitivity in a variety of ways, it is helpful to consider how the shelter environment might be modified to assist families to be more successful. Often times, using visual cues, such as directional signs to designate these modifications can help individuals with disabilities to make sense of a chaotic situation.

Individuals with autism may be sensitive to sounds, lights, or textures. In considering ways to make their stay the most successful,

talk with the individual or family to discern what about the shelter space may present a challenge. If an individual is uncomfortable in the available area, consider what other spaces or pieces of furniture are available to you (e.g. a carpeted area as opposed to a tiled one).

In one shelter, the emergency team had a particularly difficult time soothing a young man with autism who had grown tired of sitting on the lunch room benches. He expressed his displeasure through a high pitched ongoing scream. The shelter placement in an elementary school afforded the staff the opportunity to consider other classroom furniture for use. The staff brought a bean bag chair from one of the classrooms into the shelter area, and the young man was able to tolerate his emergency evacuation.

Some individuals with autism are particularly sensitive to sounds, and they may have difficulty in tolerating the new and unfamiliar noise of the shelter. If there are areas that allow for more privacy, consider allowing families to access those places. Other strategies for displacing noise include masking the sounds with specialty headphones designed to reduce noise or listening to music or movies on headphones.

In large open settings, consider how to best create “personal space” for individuals who may be sensitive to being close to new or unfamiliar people. This may mean splitting up large auditoriums into distinct areas. You can help individuals with autism recognize these boundaries by using colored tape, string, or some other visual barrier, including furniture placement.

#### Behavioral Strategies:

**Minimize wait time:** When individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities are included within a shelter, their routine is interrupted and they may have a difficult time understanding what activities will occur next. When checking families into the shelter facility, distributing meals, etc. consider how individuals with disabilities will navigate this challenge and how you will communicate this process to them.

**Identify caregiver break times:** Caregivers and families may have additional support systems that become unavailable during emergency evacuations and shelter stays. Create a plan early on for how to supplement the supervision they provide. If a caregiver is supporting

an individual who generally has 24 hour supervision, make sure you consider how to plan for bathroom breaks, meals, naps, etc. so that caregivers don't become overwhelmed or fatigued.

**Get more information:** Get information from the family and/or caregivers about what helps the individual to remain content and calm. If there is a particular item, meal, or person that may help the individual to remain content during their shelter stay, try to access it. If an individual is engaging in aggressive, disruptive, or self injurious behavior, take cues from caregivers on how to respond to this behavior. Reacting in haste may aggravate the situation and lead to the incident being more intense or longer than needed. In addition to taking cues on assisting with the behavior of concern, ask them how you can best support or reinforce appropriate behavior.

**Further Information:** Working closely with parents and professionals to plan for emergencies will assist you and them to navigate emergencies with the least possible distress. For additional training, please contact your local CARD center.

*The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)  
at the University of South Florida*

CARD-USF serves Florida families and professionals within the following counties: Charlotte, Collier, Desoto, Glades, Hardee, Hendry, Highlands, Hillsborough, Lee, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, Polk, and Sarasota.

The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at the University of South Florida is a community-based project that provides information and consultation to individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders and related disabilities. CARD-USF offers instruction and coaching to families and professionals through a training and assistance model. CARD's purpose is to enhance the lives of individuals with autism and related disabilities by helping them become valued members of their communities. CARD offers supports within the natural contexts of homes, residences, child care programs, schools and communities at large. There are 7 regional CARD centers located across the state of Florida.

## What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorders, or ASDs, are developmental disabilities characterized by differences or deficits in social interaction, communication or behavior. Developmental disabilities occur at birth and are not caused by trauma or parenting styles.

The CDC currently reports 1 in 150 children are diagnosed with autism. ASD occurs 4 to 5 times more often in boys than in girls. Symptoms are present before the age of three although diagnosis may occur later. ASD affects individuals from all racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds. Although we do not know what causes

ASD, researchers continue to study the incidence of autism and the possible causes.

## Characteristics

ASDs have common features which may include difficulties in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behavior. The features, however, can vary greatly by types, numbers and severity of symptoms from person to person.

**Communication.** Some children develop speech and then regress or lose communication skills. Others may echo or repeat what they hear. Many individuals with ASD do learn to talk, while others rely on technology, sign language, pictures or gestures to communicate. However, conversational skills, and recognizing non-verbal communication may remain difficult for most individuals with ASD.

**Social Interaction.** Persons with ASDs often have difficulty interacting with others, learning to play with peers, and developing friendships. They often have difficulty using and understanding eye contact, facial expressions, and social rules. They can be unaware of the interests and perspectives of other people and may, therefore, become socially isolated and misunderstood.

**Interests and Behavior.** Some persons with autism may engage in repetitive behavior like switching a light on and off, spinning, or rocking. Some may play with toys in an unusual manner like lining toy cars up instead of pretending to drive them. They may insist on doing the same thing in the same way and may have difficulty with changes to their surroundings or routines. Individuals with ASD also have difficulty processing information from their senses. For example, they may dislike the feel of certain fabrics or the texture of certain foods. Some individuals are very active and have difficulty with sleep. Some engage in challenging behavior, such as aggression, self-injury, or severe withdrawal.

For training, technical assistance or additional information about emergency preparedness for individuals with autism spectrum disorders please contact the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities at USF.

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