

Emergency Planning for Seniors

By Cynthia McLean

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School of Urban and Regional Planning
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Natural disasters exact a heavy toll, and with every year that passes, this toll increases. In the last 20 years, more than three million people worldwide lost their lives in floods, earthquakes, landslides, hurricanes, volcanoes, and other natural disasters (Burby, 1998). The economic consequences of these disasters were also very destructive. Property damages alone were estimated to range from \$25 to \$100 billion between 1965 and 1985 (Advisory Committee on the International Decade for Natural Hazard Reduction, 1987). With devastating natural disasters like Hurricane Andrew and the Kobe earthquake in the back of people's minds, the big question is: Will the world be prepared when the next major disaster hits? This is a question that emergency planners ask themselves every day, especially because forecasts suggest that damages from disasters are only going to rise in the future.

The aim of an emergency plan is to reduce the risks to life and property that so often accompany disasters. It does this by encouraging community officials, local agencies and the public to prepare for an emergency before it happens. This advanced preparation can help people to avoid making rash or impractical decisions that might otherwise be made in stressful emergency situations. Emergency planning allows a community to prepare realistically for an emergency, to determine where key resources and equipment are located, and to develop effective means of communicating with one another. Surprisingly, in spite of the dramatic increase in the frequency and intensity of disaster events and the obvious importance of emergency plans, emergency planning has yet to receive much academic attention.

The research conducted for this report provides insight into one of the many facets of emergency planning - that of emergency planning for older people. The question to be explored is:

How are the needs of seniors affected by an emergency; and how can a community plan to improve the delivery of critical services to this population in future emergencies?

Specifically, the objectives of this report are to provide:

- ?? a review of emergency planning in general
- ?? an examination of seniors' demand for specialized services in a disaster
- ?? an analysis of Perth's capacity to supply specialized services to seniors in the context of the 1998 Ice Storm
- ?? a set of recommendations helping local service providers and local officials to better meet the needs of seniors in a disaster by filling the gaps between the supply and demand of specialized emergency services

There are two reasons behind the decision to focus on emergency planning for seniors: first, seniors are the fastest growing age group in Canada and second, research indicates that seniors often experience difficulty coping with disaster conditions. Since Canadian communities can expect to have more of both disasters and senior citizens in the future, this report focuses on finding solutions to the kinds of problems that are often associated with older people in emergency situations.

Before proceeding further, it should be stated clearly that not all seniors would have a need for special assistance during an emergency. The reality is that many seniors possess the resources to function quite effectively in an emergency. However, this report focuses on one portion of the senior population that can be considered vulnerable in an emergency. These are the seniors that live at home, and under normal circumstances, are capable of providing adequate levels of self-care. However, during a natural disaster, they may not have the physical or emotional stamina to cope with the loss of heat and

hydro; they may have physical limitations that make mobility difficult; or they may be unable to cope with other factors that render them vulnerable. Since this particular group of seniors is not easily identifiable or traceable, it can be very difficult to ensure that their needs are met in an emergency.

To address the research question, the author conducted a qualitative case study of the Town of Perth's experience during and after the 1998 Ice Storm. This report provides an analysis of the town's capacity to meet the needs of seniors during the emergency and, based on this analysis, offers recommendations for improving service delivery to seniors in an emergency situation. The research design was emergent and made use of multiple data sources, including a literature review, document analysis and personal interviews.

It is often suggested that seniors share several characteristics that can affect an emergency response. These characteristics can be categorized under five broad headings: lack of preparedness, unpredictable life-styles, difficulties communicating, restricted mobility and deteriorating health conditions. The various characteristics that fall within these five categories can interfere with the ability of seniors to properly prepare for emergency situations in advance, to cope effectively in emergency conditions and/or to recover quickly following a disaster. For instance, when people have trouble reading small print, it can be difficult for them to access the emergency literature on topics like disaster preparedness and disaster assistance. As a result, it is very important for anyone working in emergency planning to learn about the special needs of older people and to seek the support of knowledgeable individuals who can assure that the older victims receive the special attention necessary to meet their particular needs.

In the Town of Perth, there is a higher than average number of senior citizens and therefore, the importance of considering the special needs of seniors is all the more crucial. However, like most other emergency plans, Perth's emergency plan does not explicitly address the needs of seniors. Instead, most of the contingencies are age-neutral in their approach, meaning that, in an emergency, the same plans are generally applied to everyone regardless of their age. Despite the lack of explicit planning for seniors in Perth, research revealed that Perth's 1998 Ice Storm emergency response did manage to serve the town's senior population. One section of this report is, thus, devoted to analyzing Perth's emergency response. The analysis of Perth's Ice Storm response is divided into several categories. These categories are related to the special characteristics of seniors that were identified above.

It appears that, in a number of ways, Perth's small-town character helped emergency responders to mount a successful emergency response during the Ice Storm. For instance, the lack of public preparedness that can be a major obstacle in most emergency responses was simply not a factor in Perth. In fact, the community was able to pull together and share resources quite effectively during the storm. Likewise, the small-town social networks in Perth meant that responders were able to rely on neighbours to look out for one another and to alert the response officials if anyone was in need of assistance. In most Canadian communities, a lack of public emergency preparedness and difficulties with identifying and locating people in need can be two major problems for emergency responders. In contrast, Perth's emergency response was able to provide people with the basic necessities and also to identify and locate the people requiring assistance.

Despite the relative success of the emergency response in Perth, the author was able to identify some significant weaknesses in the town's response. For instance, the town offered little or no training to emergency responders on how to assist seniors in an emergency situation. The special communication needs of seniors, for example, were never addressed. Likewise, limited arrangements were made to organize an emergency shelter that would be well suited for seniors. As a result, the shelters were unappealing to seniors, which meant that emergency responders had to shuttle seniors back and forth from their homes to the shelter. Other problems that arose during the response stemmed from a lack of coordination between responding agencies, which made it difficult to ensure that the needs of seniors were met.

This report delivers an important message to Canadian communities: it is a truly challenging responsibility to meet the needs of older disaster victims. For a person or agency that does not work in the field of the aging, it can be difficult to do the job well. One of the main objectives of this report was to offer tangible recommendations to municipal officials and local service providers to help ensure that the needs of seniors are managed effectively in a disaster. The general idea behind these recommendations suggest that in order for a community to improve the delivery of services to seniors in an emergency, much time and effort needs to be devoted to increasing preparedness, educating the public and training responders.