

Lessons from the Fires



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In the aftermath of the Waldo Canyon Fire, The Independence Center (The IC) held a forum for officials from the City of Colorado Springs, Manitou Springs and The Red Cross to discuss what the fire was like for people with disabilities. The forum provided a public avenue for those with a disability who were affected by the fire to speak up. Their comments centered around three areas:

- Barriers to effective communication for emergency broadcasts
- Barriers to transportation and mobility
- Access barriers in the shelters

There was also an overwhelming theme in the need for individual planning for an emergency. Nearly everyone who spoke mentioned that either they did not know what they were supposed to do or did not have a plan in place.

The forum was the first step in trying to bring about a more comprehensive and inclusive emergency plan. Over the last year, The IC has continued to work with city, county, local media and emergency officials, initiating contact, hosting meetings, and sharing information.





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The Black Forest Fire revealed how far we have come. The city, county, local media and emergency officials made great strides in their efforts and response to emergency information and communication for people with disabilities. The Waldo Canyon Fire forum revealed that many individuals with disabilities did not know what to do during the fire, or did not have a plan in place for an emergency situation.

Many communication barriers existed and were among the most problematic concerns. Due to the work of The IC and their community partners, strong efforts have been started to ensure the issues that arose during the Waldo Canyon fire for those with disabilities did not occur again.

Over the last year, The IC completed the following activities:

- The IC created “Know Your Sources,” a resource of accessible emergency alerts. This resource highlights sources including where people can get information from, products a person can purchase and credible news sites.
- Emergency preparation starts with the individual and the “Know Your Sources” guide enables individuals, especially those with a disability, to take control of their information sources and be prepared when a disaster strikes. This guide has been distributed throughout the community as well as advertised on our website and blog.
- Included in the “Know Your Sources” resource is The Independence Center’s Personal Emergency Preparedness Workbook, which includes an emergency checklist, what emergency kits should contain, and emergency preparedness tips all catered towards individuals with specific disabilities, such as mobility, cognitive or visual limitations and individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.



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- The Independence Center hosted a representative from El Paso County at its monthly Deaf Chat on May 17, 2013. The county shared its emergency alert system and emergency information for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Emergency Preparedness Planner for El Paso County, Kathy Russell, presented to more than 40 people during the two-hour meeting. The Deaf Chat covered multiple topics including emergency alert tips along with understanding E-911 Emergency Notification System and National Weather Radio alerts. Russell also discussed the topic of sheltering during an emergency and what the county's goal for emergency sheltering consists of.
- During the County's presentation to The IC's monthly Deaf Chat, Russell asked for volunteers to work with Manitou Springs to ensure their alerts were accessible to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities.



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- The Deaf and Hard of Hearing communities advocated to the local TV stations for live closed captioning on news programs and visible sign language interpreters for live press conferences. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing community met with managers of local TV stations to explain their needs and dialogue about possible solutions.
- The Independence Center created an emergency preparation blog series that included several topics such as, what an emergency kit should consist of, evacuation tips, how to drive in an emergency situation, creating a personal support network and understanding emergency alerts. Additionally, these blog posts as well as additional emergency preparedness tips were posted on Facebook and Twitter.

During the Black Forest Fire, we were proud to see a sign language interpreter during the news briefings and how the local TV stations worked to continuously show the interpreter, even when the camera shifted to another view. Additionally, live captioning was provided and up-to-date and detail information on the scroll on the bottom of the screen proved it much easier to understand the current situation. The shelters at Palmer Ridge High School and New Life Church were also fully accessible, and volunteers were knowledgeable about what to do if someone who was Deaf, blind or who used a wheelchair came into the facility.



Change takes time. It was gratifying to see many of the messages and requests that our consumers and we had been asking for in the last year were accomplished. While everyone has made strides in improving the community's emergency plan, there are still many things that we hope to accomplish.

In the next year, we are going to focus on:

- Working as a partner with the County and City to enhance their disaster plan for People with Disabilities. We hope to develop a Community Advisory Group (CAG), which is a small committee of volunteers with a variety of disabilities and service providers. The group works with the emergency planners to develop a plan for helping people with disabilities during an emergency.
- Helping people with disabilities, their families and/or caregivers to develop personal disaster plans with backup through individual and small group sessions
- The IC has hired our own emergency coordinator.
- Take the success and progress we have seen in Colorado Springs and move out into the other seven counties we serve: Kit Carson, Teller, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Park, Elbert and Lincoln, working with emergency planners and local people with disabilities on plans for those areas.



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