

The Problem

Over the past five years, Colorado has been home to six wildfires, two of which were the most destructive in the state's history. These fires have cost the people of Colorado more than a billion dollars in property loss alone.

The threat of wildfire in Colorado will only continue to increase, as we are witnessing a steady rise worldwide in climate-related disasters. According to Natural Hazards Observer, there were 2,451 significant natural disasters between 2001 and 2010, nearly 1,000 more than the prior 10-year period, and three times more than during the 1980s.

Emergency planning is an issue of utmost importance for the state of Colorado. And as we prepare for these future crises, it is critical that we include seniors and people with disabilities in the conversation. Nearly one in five people in Colorado lives with a disability. Colorado's senior population is growing at nearly twice the rate of the state's total population. Yet at the state and local levels, emergency response planning and operations do not take a complete view of the community, often placing the lives of seniors and people with disabilities in unnecessary risk.

We need to move away from the current strategy of setting aside seniors and people with disabilities in our emergency operations and instead include these communities in the crafting of inclusive planning. For that to occur, our emergency planning conversation must be expanded. We will save lives and money by more fully embracing emergency preparedness planning that is inclusive of the whole community.

Aftermath of Colorado's Waldo Canyon Fire, Photo by Michael Rieger/FEMA



The Background

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 laid the foundation for inclusive emergency planning by prohibiting the discrimination of people with disabilities in programs conducted by federal agencies or in programs that receive federal financial assistance. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act further strengthened these regulations by requiring equal access for people with disabilities when it comes to public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications, all of which are included within emergency management.

Nationally, Hurricane Katrina was a wake-up call for the critical need for inclusive emergency planning. In the aftermath of that disaster, it was discovered that 22 percent of the affected population didn't evacuate their homes because of a disability, and 23 percent didn't evacuate because they were caring for someone with a disability. Nearly 70 percent of the people who died in Hurricane Katrina were seniors over the age of 60.

Failure to comply with federal regulations not only lessens a community's ability to save lives and minimize the personal devastation caused by disasters, it also opens up municipalities to the threat of lawsuit. Currently, Los Angeles, New York City, Fort Morgan, and Washington D.C. have all been found in violation of the ADA as it pertains to emergency systems.

Appropriate emergency planning must ensure that communication networks, evacuation plans, access to shelter, and access to recovery programs are compliant with federal regulations. However, in the aftermath of the Waldo Canyon fire of 2012, numerous incidents were reported in which the emergency preparedness failed the community-at-large by failing people with disabilities.

Two residents of Manitou Springs didn't evacuate their homes because, being deaf, they were completely unaware of the threat level. The local news media had failed to employ sign language interpreters during their broadcasts, and no one saw to it that this requirement be met. The E911 also failed to notify people with disabilities and the general public. At one shelter, evacuees with developmental disabilities and in wheelchairs were sent to assisted living facilities, an unnecessary and costly decision. Another woman spent three days upright in her wheelchair with family because she couldn't find a shelter with an accessible bed.

After Waldo Canyon, alarmed by these deficiencies, The Independence Center began advocating for inclusivity in emergency planning. Thanks to this concerted effort, we saw some strides taken in inclusive emergency preparedness in Colorado Springs during the Black Forest fire of 2013.

Local broadcasters were alerted to the need for sign language interpreters and better captioning -- this had simply not dawned on them until it was brought to their attention. Shelters at a local church and a high school adopted strategies to be fully accessible. The Independence Center also put together a "Know Your Sources" resource for the community of people with disabilities. This directed them to accurate and disability-sensitive news sources that they could follow during an emergency, in order to take proactive steps for their own benefit.

In 2013, The Independence Center hired a full-time emergency coordinator to act as a liaison between the emergency management agencies and the community of people with disabilities in Colorado Springs and El Paso County. The

emergency coordinator was able to advise these local municipalities as to best methods for providing information in accessible formats. Also, the emergency coordinator was able to advise and guide those with disabilities and the agencies that serve them as to evacuation strategies and sheltering options. And further, the emergency coordinator offered information and guidance during the recovery process, so that those with disabilities were better able to recoup their losses and resume their daily lives.

Being an issue-matter expert on not only emergency management but also the needs of those with disabilities, The Independence Center's emergency coordinator was a unique and sought-after resource. During the flooding of September 2013, at the request of FEMA,

the emergency coordinator worked across the state to help streamline emergency responses for the community as whole. This required daily communication, recommendations, and guidance to emergency responders as well as the advocates for people with disabilities and the elderly.

The emergency coordinator further organized a Consumer Advisory Group, or CAG, of people with disabilities, and their advocates, to help formulate the best strategies for preparedness. Through this dialog, a fuller understanding was developed. Not only did the agencies tasked with protecting the public gain a better understanding of the complexities posed by a disability, but those in the disability community were more fully informed on the best ways that they could prepare for, and survive, a crisis.

A Real Success Story

The Waldo Canyon fire of 2012 revealed barriers that people with disabilities face in emergencies. After the fire, The Independence Center (The IC) and Rocky Mountain ADA Center hosted a public forum. Themes emerged revealing barriers to communication during emergency broadcasts, to transportation and mobility, and to access in the shelters. It was clear that change was required and people with disabilities needed to be included in the planning.

The IC instituted an Emergency Preparedness program and hired an emergency Coordinator. The coordinator had personal experience with disability, grasped vocabulary and concepts that crossed into both camps, and effectively bridged the gap between the disability community and local government and first responders. The understanding created by this bridge brought inclusivity for persons with disabilities into local emergency planning. This inclusiveness is now a permanent part of the emergency planning infrastructure in both the City of Colorado Springs and El Paso County.

Another theme that emerged was personal unpreparedness. The IC Emergency Preparedness program tackled this by hosting workshops for persons with disabilities. The IC developed the Personal Emergency Preparedness Workbook for use at the workshop. Individuals left with their own draft plan.

These successes led to the receipt of key grants from Disability-Benefits Support Contract Committee (DBSCC) and the Daniels Fund. Funding allowed for development of an accessibility assessment video and kit for emergency shelters. The IC will use this video and kit when it hosts accessibility trainings for the American Red Cross Colorado Chapters in 2015-2016.

Success was achieved on two fronts: 1) increasing inclusivity in the infrastructure that includes government and first responders and 2) increasing personal responsibility in preparedness.

A Call to Action

There is simply too much work that needs to be done across the state for one person in Colorado Springs. Local and state agencies are ill-equipped to develop the robust plans that take into account their local communities during a crisis. As hard as these government agencies work, they need partners from within the local disability and disability-advocacy communities to assist them in this critical mission.

The Independence Center believes, to develop truly inclusive emergency preparedness plans for Colorado's disabled community, there needs to be a statewide network of local disability service emergency coordinators. Using the model that has been developed by The Independence Center, these experts would work with state and local agencies, as well as the community for people with disabilities. Through the development of CAGs in their own unique regions, they would be able to inform and educate emergency responders on how to best reach and serve the local services and disability communities.

Of course, this network will take an investment. While The Independence Center funded the position for an emergency coordinator, this may not be feasible for 8 to 10 disability competent organizations required to form this network. **We need the state legislature and local governments to make this network a priority. Whether it is through federal FEMA grants, awarded every year to the state, or assistance from state or local governments, we need our partners in government to help us ensure that this network becomes a reality.**

Inclusive planning creates a more resilient, self-reliant community. A small investment in money and time now will have an exponential impact

on the smart use of resources available during a crisis. It will better prepare emergency responders to address the needs of the entire community before, during, and after a natural disaster. More importantly, inclusive planning will allow those with disabilities to better take control of their own safety.



The Independence Center is one of the ten Centers for Independent Living in Colorado and is located in Colorado Springs. The IC serves over 800 people with disabilities in El Paso, Teller, Park, Lincoln, Cheyenne, and Kit Carson counties. In addition to providing Independent Living Services in the community, The Independence Center also operates a Home Health program, funded by Medicaid, that pays for personal services in the home to prevent institutionalization. We employ 300 people, 225 who are Home Health field staff.

People with disabilities
building community
THE INDEPENDENCE CENTER