

Fact sheet: Supporting older adults after a disaster

Access to appropriate care and support will have an influence on disaster outcomes for older adults. It is important that assistance given to older adults in the recovery phase of a disaster is sensitive to age related needs.

Rest Home residents

- All rest homes will have disaster plans, which address the needs of their residents in an emergency. These plans will emphasise continuity of care, which will help to minimise the perceived stress from the disaster, and maintain an environment of trust and protection.
- Recognise that rest home staff will have additional workload burdens. The staff are also victims of the same disaster, they will be concerned for the welfare of their own families and friends, while also caring for the welfare of their rest home residents.

Independent older adults in the community

1. Check to ensure ongoing medical care can be maintained

- The over 65 year old age group has a diverse range of age related physical and cognitive health needs, continuity of personal medications will need to be maintained. This may be compounded by loss or damage of disability and personal items such as reading and or prescription glasses, hearing aids and mobility equipment. Loss of lifelines such as electricity, water and telephone may mean older adults should not remain in their homes.

2. Ensure social connectedness

- Older adults may have fewer people to rely on for post disaster assistance and many may live alone. Their social networks and level of social connectedness also may be reduced because friends and family they could expect to call on for help may also be victims of the same disaster, and may not be available.
- Health, welfare and community agencies will be an important lifeline for those more socially vulnerable, if these services are disrupted it may mean that independent living is no longer safe. For example, disruption of services to older adults receiving Meals on Wheels will place greater stress on being able to live independently.
- Older adults may not ask for help, and may minimise their own health and wellbeing following the disaster, because they do not want to bother others. They may also evaluate the needs of others in the community as being more important than their own health needs.
- Set up mutual support groups for older adults in neighbourhood to share friendship and companionship.

4. Older adults have a great deal of life experience and a lot to offer. Although they have special needs they also have a lot of skills and knowledge to use to help their community - don't leave them out of local support initiatives.

3. Provision of social support after a disaster

- Social support plays an important role in disaster recovery, and can help protect older adults against the negative impact of stress on health and wellbeing. Social support can help older adults regain a sense of control and mastery after the disaster.

Practical social support:

- Includes tangible help with cleaning up home and property; help with shopping and meals; financial help; assistance to get to medical and other appointments; assistance with transport – there may be concerns by older adults about driving again due to damaged roads, and altered new driving routes to learn. As a result older adults may become less independent.
- It will be important to identify those older adults without insurance, as they are more likely to take longer to recover from the effects of their losses as they lack the financial resources needed, and may need both practical help to replace household items and assistance to obtain monetary grants
- Assistance to save and protect treasured possessions from earthquake damage can be very important for psychosocial wellbeing in old age, because significant items in an older person's life can provide a sense of connection with the past through the meanings they have for each owner (for example: photographs, certificates, personal memorabilia).

Emotional social support:

- Visiting older adults provides them with a sense of caring, comfort, empathy and belonging. This may include helping older adults to communicate with friends, family and welfare organisations.

Informational social support:

- Verbal and written advice can assist older adults to become aware of the help that is available to them, how to contact the relevant people and/or agencies, and where to go for help.

Advocacy support:

- Older adults living independently in the community may need advocacy assistance with insurance claims, which may include help to take photographs

to document their losses, and assistance to lodge insurance claims. Providing advocacy assistance that enables older adults to make early contact with insurance companies and develop a good rapport with the assessors will positively influence recovery. The responsiveness of insurance companies and builders to older adults' requirements in the reconstruction phase will also play an important role in their recovery of older adults.

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