

Seniors particularly vulnerable in Sandy's aftermath

31 October 2012

Older adults left in the wake of Hurricane Sandy will likely suffer disproportionately in the days ahead, based on data from other recent natural disasters.

For example, three quarters of those who perished in [Hurricane Katrina](#) were over the age of 60, according to the [spring 2006 edition](#) of *Public Policy & Aging Report* from The Gerontological Society of America (GSA). Similarly, a recent issue of the *Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences* [reported](#) that the May 2008 earthquake in Wenchuan, China, was associated with a twofold increase in the one-year mortality among a group of residents in their 90s that lived nearby.

"Right now, most people who are responding to the hurricane are not trained in the needs of older adults," said Lisa M. Brown, PhD, a co-convenor of GSA's Disasters and Older Adults Interest Group and an associate professor at the University of South Florida. "Likewise, very few geriatricians and gerontologists are trained in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery."

The interest group will next meet during GSA's upcoming [Annual Scientific Meeting](#), which will take place from November 14 to 18 in San Diego. Brown leads the group with fellow GSA member and co-convenor Maggie Gibson, PhD, of St. Joseph's Health Care London in Ontario, Canada.

The two also will chair a symposium, "Older Adults and Disasters: Are Gerontologists Paying Attention?" in San Diego. During this session, expert presenters will discuss the social, mental, and physical health concerns of older adults at all stages of a disaster and explain the critical role of gerontologists in shaping public health preparedness and responsiveness to disasters. They will also identify why older adults remain unusually vulnerable, relative to children and younger adults, during catastrophic events.

"We don't have continuity in the disaster infrastructure for [older adults](#). Our efforts tend to be more reactive post-disaster than proactive pre-disaster," Brown said. "More research in this area will result in targeted policies and refined programs that would enhance existing systems of care."

There also is a growing field of literature that outlines necessary steps for elder disaster preparedness in the face of an emergency. The [Public Policy & Aging Report](#) demonstrated that multi-tiered evacuation plans, pre-existing social networks, and "go-kits" can be used to assist elders at critical moments. These kits may include detailed contact information for family members; contact information for relevant health care providers; high-nutrient foods; and a week's supply of all prescription and over-the-counter medications, including a list of medications, the required dosage, and times of administration.

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

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