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# Promising Practices for Fixed-Route & Paratransit Agencies: Communicating with Older Adults Before, During & After Emergencies

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*This information brief outlines communications practices and recommendations for transportation providers on how they can effectively reach older adult audiences before, during, and after an emergency. For the purposes of this brief, emergency situations encompass but are not limited to natural disasters, terrorist attacks, passenger incidents that involve mass injuries or fatalities, large-scale equipment failure, power failure, vehicle evacuations, and major service disruptions.*

## Introduction

Whether emergencies are man-made (e.g., terrorist threats), weather-related, or incident-related hazards (e.g., chemical spill), transportation agency communication to customers should be planned in advance of a crisis and shared with all staff members. For older adult customers, special consideration should be given to media most likely to be listened to or read by seniors. Special attention should be paid to changes in media choices as the Baby Boomers age into their senior years, keeping in mind that the Baby Boomers' media choices may be different than how members of the G.I./Greatest Generation (born between 1901 and 1924) and the Silent Generation (born between 1925 and the mid-1940s) prefer to receive their information.

Key considerations for communicating with older adults, including seniors who have disabilities, involve understanding how seniors find out most of their information and which media outlets they trust and turn to regularly for local news. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, local television is a source of political content and news for 60% of the Baby Boomers who responded to the survey whereas 39% stated that they rely on social media (e.g., Facebook) for news content. The G.I. and Silent Generations are less likely to use internet-based sources of information, relying more on television, radio, newspapers, and person-to-person information sharing. (Pew)

In general, older adults may choose to receive their information from a wider variety of outlets than in the past. It is recommended, however, that a mix of traditional and newer media options continue to be used encompassing television, newspapers, radio, Internet services, text message alerts, and social media including Facebook and Twitter. In the *Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business* paper "Marketing to the Generations", it is noted that the oldest living generations rely predominantly on traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio, although the youngest members of the Silent Generation are among the fastest group of internet users. As noted earlier, for seniors who are the eldest members of the Baby Boom generation, TV and radio are still popular sources of information with more members of this generation beginning to delve into social media and phone alerts yet not as likely to use social media for news alerts compared to Generation X members or Millennials. (Wells and Page)

## Information to Communicate

Once media options are chosen, message content and style need to be determined. The Federal Highway Administration's *Evacuating Populations with Special Needs* booklet includes practical tips for creating messages. Content that should be communicated to potential transportation users includes:

- What transportation is available during an emergency (information about public transportation available or how to contact private transportation)
- How to sign up for a transportation registry
- What the passenger can take with them on transportation.
- How to ask for interpreter or other assistance
- Where transportation will be operating and where it will drop customers off during the emergency
- Accessibility of transit vehicles being used
- What you should bring with you
- What facilities will be made available at a shelter and how to return home after an event

When creating messages, consider the diversity of your audience. Local agencies should provide information for residents with limited English proficiency, write messages in clear, easy to understand language (avoiding jargon and acronyms), and make printed materials available in large print and braille. When formatting materials for an older adult audience, pick simple font types and increase the font size for easier reading. It is a good idea to portray older adults of diverse backgrounds in any photographs used.  When older adults see themselves in imagery, they are more apt to think that a situation applies to them and are more apt to read the material and participate as instructed.

Pictorial images and universally understood symbols can be used to convey messages for all audiences. Examples include a cross for first aid, a water bottle for water and

food supplies, a gathering of people with arrows for a meeting point, and a picture of a bus for transportation location. All restrooms, stairs, and exits at emergency facilities should include picture imagery and clear directions. When preparing messages for older adults or speaking with them, consider that caretakers and family members may be involved in the conversation or have a role in conveying instructions.



**Figure 1 – Emergency evacuation by motorcoach. Credit: Patsy Lynch/FEMA**

If using photography or illustrations as part of messaging and signage know your audience and show your audience. Older adults are more likely to go shelters and use evacuation transportation if they know that their peers are doing so. Agencies and media should show pictures, video footage, and interviews with older adults and/or older adults with disabilities to signify that responders have shelters, transportation, and supplies available to meet their needs. Depending on the community, specific shelters may be tailored to the needs of older adults or people with disabilities.

## Agency Preparation before an Emergency

Communications and administrative staff may have responsibility for preparing messages, but all staff members should have an opportunity to review both internal and external communications plans and messages long before an emergency communication plan is put into place.

Prepare emergency response guidelines for employees and as part of those guidelines, keep a checklist of communication needs.  Recommendations from the Federal Highway Administration include but are not limited to:

- Prepare a checklist focused on your communication outreach in addition to your overarching emergency preparedness checklist.
- Designate a primary point of contact if you do not have a public information officer.
- Identify a list of local agencies, faith-based organizations, educational institutions, and ethnic outreach organizations that should receive emergency information, and place them in your contact network. These organizations should receive your messages before and at the same time as the public.
- Pre-identify spoken languages used in the community, including American Sign Language.

- Identify communication tools and resources needed during emergencies (e.g., sign boards, pens, paper, nametags, bullhorns, microphones, projectors, speakers, televisions, and laptops).
- Prior to emergencies and as part of periodic staff training, review and practice commonly used words in foreign languages.
- Prepare script language for staff to use when specific information or instructions need to be repeated by staff.
- Develop emergency-specific contact information for your agency. For example, have a toll-free information line, email address, and website page dedicated specifically for contact during emergencies.
- Create or purchase communication boards that include signs and pictures for common languages spoken in the community.
- Use technology as needed, realizing that technology (e.g., phones, walkie-talkies, internet, electricity for variable message signs) may fail during an emergency. Have alternative options available.
- Include maps in your press releases and messages. Maps are particularly useful for identifying evacuation routes, blocked roads, and transit routes.
- Involve older adults in the planning process for preparing messages, identifying media outlets and organizations.
- Let older adults in your community know in advance how information will be distributed so that they know where to look or how to listen for emergency news.

When it comes to deciding what media to use for emergency messages, the Federal Emergency Management Agency suggests these possible options:

- news releases
- blog posts
- text message alerts
- website postings
- public service announcements
- local television channels
- reader boards
- loud-speakers
- door hangers
- flyers
- briefings and community meetings

One way to improve older adult awareness of what communication to expect during an emergency is to let the community know in advance how communication will be relayed and what level of transportation service will be available. This applies to both fixed-route and paratransit operations. Transportation agencies can provide public education at senior centers, fairs, festivals, and shopping centers. National Night Out events and neighborhood association meetings are other settings where older adults can find out how to tune in for emergency information.

## During an Emergency

- Regularly update staff on the status of the situation so that they can respond to questions and take appropriate action as needed.

- Update information on a prescribed schedule or as soon as new information is available.
- Messages should announce passenger responsibilities (e.g., passengers or evacuees are responsible for keeping their possessions with them).
- Continue to use a variety of media and accessible formats for communication. Alternative, accessible formats include braille, large type, audio, and non-English language.
- Format your website to accept inquiries during an emergency.

## After an Emergency

Communication after an event is just as important as any preparatory communication. Post-emergency communication is not only informative but also serves the purpose of confirming the safety of vehicles or facilities involved, bolstering public confidence, and informing the community about the status of transportation service. Recovery news should incorporate any actions the public should take, summaries, and impacts. It is important to point out the actions that the response agencies are taking.  As the Federal Emergency Management Agency's *Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers* notes, "Regular communication about recovery efforts, even though response efforts may not be over, reassures the public that government agencies are working together to resolve the situation and to bring assistance to those who need it." (FEMA)

Two other important aspects of post-emergency communication are documentation and evaluation—steps that some agencies may forget to consider or may not take the time to do—which are useful for future emergencies. **Documentation** will help your agency identify the most requested information, frequently asked questions, positive outcomes, and lessons learned. Items to document include the types of questions received, media contacts, and messages delivered by media. **Evaluation** can be done through survey, providing a customer comment form, and person-to-person outreach at community centers, senior centers, and residential facilities. Gathering feedback from both customers and agency employees enables communication professionals to evaluate the reach and effectiveness of emergency messages. Reviewing analytics from your agency's emergency webpage, social media, or electronic news alerts is useful for examining audience reach and discerning what links received the highest number of clicks or which tweets and posts were re-tweeted and shared.

## Resources for Staff Training

Transportation staff training is an essential element of emergency communication planning. Training should incorporate information on how to communicate with a variety of audiences—including older adults, people with limited English proficiency, and people with disabilities. The National Center on Senior Transportation and Easter Seals offer resources on communicating with people who have sensory disabilities (e.g., are blind, have visual impairments or who are deaf or hard of hearing), physical disabilities, and

cognitive disabilities, and also have information on etiquette regarding interaction with service animals. Transportation staff responders should know that disabilities vary person-to-person and that respectful and patient communication is important for an effective evacuation.

Personnel or public information officers responsible for communication during an emergency should be involved in or kept informed of any training exercises or emergency drills. As FEMA recommends, it is beneficial to let the public and the media know that exercises are taking place and to address questions the media might have about how information will be distributed during both an unexpected incident or planned event.  In addition, establishing relationships and introductions with the media in advance will make it easier when an emergency does occur.

## Summary

Communicating with older adults is similar to communicating with the public at large; however, considerations should be given to address particular concerns or media preferences for the age group. Older adults using the transit system during an emergency may be doing so for the first time so language should be clear and free of acronyms, slang, or agency terms that the general public would not recognize. Communication messages should have clear directions on what transportation will be available, where transportation vehicles will take evacuees in the case of an evacuation, and what residents can or cannot bring on board (e.g., medical equipment or supplies, pets, family members, food, belongings). In addition, older adults will want to know whether transportation will be available when they are ready to return to their homes.

To understand what is important to older adults, ensure that there is older adult representation on your transportation advisory committee and other community groups. In addition, it is best to engage with the senior community throughout the year not just when a disaster strikes. With consideration of the how older adults like to receive information and with the feedback of members of the community, your agency will be well-prepared to effectively get the word out and actively participate in emergency response.

### Resources

The following resources address communication considerations before, during, and after an emergency as well as communication technology and social media use by older adults.

*Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers (PIOs).* (2007). Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Incident Management System (NIMS), http://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1623-20490-0276/basic_guidance_for_pios_final_draft_12_06_07.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Emergency Preparedness and Personal Preparedness Resources
http://www.cdc.gov/aging/emergency/preparedness.htm

*Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication.* (2014) U.S Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/resources/pdf/cerc_2014edition.pdf

*Disaster Planning Tips for Older Adults and Their Families.* (n.d.) Centers for Disease Control Healthy Aging Program
http://www.cdc.gov/aging/pdf/disaster_planning_tips.pdf

*Emergency Preparedness Guide for Transit Employees on the Job and at Home.* (n.d.) Federal Transit Administration.
http://transit-safety.volpe.dot.gov/EPG/default.htm

*Evacuating Populations with Special Needs: Routes to Effective Evacuation Planning Primer Series, Chapter 4: Communication Needs.* (2009). U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration.
http://www.ops.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/fhwahop09022/fhwahop09022.pdf

*The Evacuation of Older People: The Case of Hurricane Katrina* from Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences. (2007). Social Science Research Council. http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Bytheway/

*From GIs To Gen Z (Or Is It iGen?): How Generations Get Nicknames.* (2014). National Public Radio.
http://www.npr.org/2014/10/06/349316543/don-t-label-me-origins-of-generational-names-and-why-we-use-them

*Millennials and Political News: Social Media—the Local TV for the Next Generation?* (2015). Pew Research Center. http://www.journalism.org/2015/06/01/millennials-political-news/

*Older People, Technology and Community: The Potential of Technology to Help Older People Renew or Develop Social Contacts and to Actively Engage in their Communities.* (2008) Independent Age (Royal United Kingdom Benefit Association).
http://www.cisco.com/web/about/ac79/docs/wp/ps/Report.pdf

*Transportation and Emergency Preparedness Checklist.* (n.d.). Community Transportation Association of America, The National Consortium on Human Services Transportation.
http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/articlefiles/Emergency_Checklist.pdf

*Transit Cooperative Research Program Report 150: Communication with Vulnerable Populations: A Transportation and Emergency Management Kit.* (2011). Transportation Research Board.
http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_150.pdf

*Transit Cooperative Research Program Report 160: Paratransit Emergency Preparedness and Operations Handbook.* (2013). Transportation Research Board.
http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/tcrp/tcrp_rpt_160.pdf

Williams, K.C. & Page, R. A. (n.d.).  Marketing to the Generations. *Journal of Behavioral Sciences.* http://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/10575.pdf

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