SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WITH COGNITIVE NEEDS DURING CRISIS PLANNING

Objectives:

- Increase understanding of the unique needs that may arise
- How to mitigate the impact of disasters on individuals with cognitive needs
- Develop concrete steps in response planning for individuals, caregivers and responders
- Sheltering at home vs going to a shelter
- Supporting the caregiver
What are some of the things to consider about individuals who have cognitive delays?

- Individuals may have difficulty processing information
- Memory and judgment can be impaired
- Transitioning can create distress
- Communication may be limited, both expressively and receptively
- Individuals may be dependent on others for their care
- Distress may result in maladaptive response
- Social interactions may be challenging

Understanding the needs of the individual

Common Incorrect Assumptions:

- People with cognitive delays can’t understand complex ideas at all
- They need to be protected
- They are completely reliant on others
- The only problems they have are cognitive
- They are always happy
The reality of the situation

Individuals with cognitive delays:
- May lack ability to cope because they have been sheltered
- Can have strong independence skills
- Can have psychiatric and health related needs
- May have a caregiver to address some of their functional needs
- May have communication challenges
- May have difficulty processing information

Building Independence Skills

Tasks for supports and service providers:
- Share information effectively
- Assist in trouble shooting
- Identify social supports
- Have easily accessible information
- Develop communication plans
- Establish response plans
- Normalize planning by making it a routine
Empowering the higher functioning individual

- Practice emergency planning
- Identify social support contacts
  - Friends, neighbors, religious supports, club members
- Identify community supports
  - Social Services, food pantries, Walk in health centers
- Learn safe food preparation
- Be mindful of how to obtain medication and services when the community is impacted
- Ask questions about what you want to know

Suggestions to increase independence

- Share correct and current information
- Assist with problem solving
- Register with 911
- Post information in easy to find places
- Provide ways for them to reach known providers or supports during crisis
- Practice concrete ways to prepare
- Review successes
- Repeat, repeat, repeat…
### Further independence building

- Don’t wait for a time of crisis to discuss
- Make sure they have access to medication, medical providers
- Encourage check-in’s by providers
- Create buddy systems for support
- Create bad weather routines
- Prepare caregivers, service providers with supports they may need to do their jobs during a crisis
- Repeat, repeat, repeat…

### For individuals with more complex needs:

- Prioritize the involvement of the caregivers in planning
- Ensuring staff members’ safe arrival to work is the most important component for stability
- Train staff for continuity of care in times of power outages and inclement weather
- Identify alternate supports in the immediate vicinity
- Maintain routine as much as possible
- Be mindful of co-existing health needs
For residential or community housing

- Involve the residents in the planning
- Train everyone in “Emergency Protocols”
- Send out written “Emergency Protocols”
- Identify medical or food preparation equipment that needs electricity
- Designate staff to do check-in’s and follow up’s
- Plan for 72 hours of sheltering in place
- Enable your staff to be flexible about coverage
- Set up buddy system with other sites

Suggested Pre-event Checklist

- Register with 911
- Establish/contact support circle
- Post important information
- Send out reminders
- Set up a check-in system
- Keep people updated with correct news
- Identify staff who can be more flexible in coverage
- Use social stories to help prepare people
- Take time to process
- Assess the home before an event for safety
Important reminder

Often family members or caregivers try to protect an individual from the harsher realities of life. There may be concern about “worrying” a person, or fear of “upsetting them” that can result in a person being unprepared, frightened by the unknown and unsure how to respond to a situation.

How can you support a person with cognitive delays?

- Let someone know what to expect
- Help process the media’s message
- Remind them of past success when dealing with stressors
- Be mindful of your language
- Respect routine and familiarity
- Repeat, practice and drill
- Normalize the experience and remain calm!
Sheltering at home

- Abrupt transitions or unfamiliar routines and environments can cause distress
- Shelters can be over stimulating, unfamiliar and overwhelming for some individuals
- When the option to remain at home safely is available, it can minimize stress and chaos
- Plan to shelter in place for 72 hours

Safety first! Follow evacuation orders!

Going to a shelter

- Prioritize mood stability during a change and maintain as much familiarity as possible
- Caregivers should make all efforts to help the person make a positive narrative
  - Use familiar terms
  - Reframe when possible
  - Share information simply without undue emotion
- Enabling people to have familiar objects, routines, and contact with people important to them may help the transition to a new environment
Going to a shelter (continued)

• Caregivers should quickly notify service providers of the evacuation in order to ensure continuity of care
• Medical information and inventories should be brought and shared with health care providers
• Caregivers should be advocates, and champion those in their care
• Seek low-stimuli environments
• Address special dietary needs

Suggestions for Shelter Operators

• Invite agencies and providers to visit the shelter and have contact information for them
• Identify caregivers and assist in keeping the individuals together
• Provide quiet spaces
• Respect routines
• Screen for health needs
Additional Suggestions:

- Identify an individual’s health needs that may impact their ability to cope, or navigate an environment.
- Encourage use of pre-existing coping skills.
- Provide handouts when possible, so people do not have to rely on memory that may be limited.
- And please, when appropriate, praise someone’s efforts and bravery, and share a “thank you” to a caregiver. Getting efforts acknowledged means a great deal.

Supporting the Caregiver…

Caregivers may have an overwhelming task in maintaining routines and providing support during a time of crisis.

Check in with the caregivers as well as the individual(s). If the caregiver is stressed and overwhelmed, the distress is likely to be communicated to a person who is already having a difficult time transitioning.