

Lex Frieden: Welcome to Focus on Abilities, a program about issues affecting the lives of people with disabilities. My name is Lex Frieden. I'm senior vice president at TIRR, the Institute for Rehabilitation and Research, and I'll be your host for today's program. We have a great show about emergency preparedness for you today, and we have some excellent guests to talk about issues that affect your lives and the lives of your family members, friends, and even your pets. Before we introduce our guests, I want to ask you a question, one that we'll answer before the end of today's program. That is: why is the number 2-1-1 important to you? We'll answer the question before the show ends today. Now it's a pleasure for me to introduce our guests. We have with us today Miss Maggie Elestwani. Maggie, welcome to Focus on Abilities.

Maggie Elestwani: Thank you.

Lex Frieden: Maggie is a nurse with the Memorial Hermann Hospital system, and she's a volunteer with the Red Cross. You'll hear more about that later. Doctor Donna Bloodworth, from Baylor College of Medicine is here, and Donna is a rehabilitation physician who actually worked at the Astrodome, following the Katrina and Rita events. And Mr. Jim Laughlin. Jim is with Metro. Jim has personal experience with disability and he also is responsible for the transit system that provides many, many services to people with disabilities in the greater Houston metropolitan area. Welcome to all of you and thanks for being here. Maggie, you actually were involved after the hurricanes with the Red Cross and their shelters. Do you know about how many people were served by those shelters and how many of those were people with disabilities?

Maggie Elestwani: We had many more shelters out in the community than many people were aware of. I think our estimates are close to the tens of thousands served. And these shelters were spread throughout the area, all the way from Brenham, up to the north, to Conroe, down to Galveston and east towards Louisiana, actually.

Lex Frieden: And they were just open to members of the public who dropped in, right?

Maggie Elestwani: Absolutely, yes.

Lex Frieden: Now were there any issues that related to people with disabilities dropping in, people with special needs?

Maggie Elestwani: Well the first thing to know about these shelters that the Red Cross has, that I was volunteering in, is that these are mass care shelters. So the ratio of a nurse to the clients is about 1:25 or 1:300. So it can be very variable. So very appropriate for individuals who are independent in the community. For those individuals who are independent, we found that for those who have high blood pressure, but were independent in their mobility, that would be appropriate. For the individuals who required more care, and who did not have a support person, they were referred to the city.

Lex Frieden: Now when you say "referred to the city," they were given directions to the George R. Brown?

Maggie Elestwani: Oh no. No, absolutely not. There was a very special protocol that was existing at that time, and it was called the special needs protocol. All of the nurses with Red Cross were informed that should there be a situation where our mass care shelter was not appropriate, we were to contact

this number at the Catastrophic Medical Operations Center for the city, and we could refer the clients over there. We worked with them.

Lex Frieden: So you actually entered them in a database that presumably ensured that they went the appropriate place to receive assistance.

Maggie Elestwani: It wasn't actually a database, what it was, was a case management approach. So when we contacted the city, they would work with the client and their family to see where the most appropriate place would be.

Lex Frieden: Now Donna, many of the people who had special needs wound up one way or the other at the Astrodome, or the George R. Brown Convention Center. And I guess the George R. Brown was the principal place for people with the most disabilities, but because so many people from New Orleans and Louisiana went to the Astrodome, you had many people there with disabilities as well, right?

Donna Bloodworth: We did at the Astrodome which is where I was after Katrina. I wasn't at the George R. Brown at all. But there were two interesting things, two interesting groups of persons with disabilities at the Astrodome. Some folks had acute physical disability, and weren't previous persons using mobility equipment. And that was just an interesting problem that even somebody who's practiced rehabilitation for 15 years, I didn't anticipate that. Very interesting problem.

Lex Frieden: So these are people who might have--

Donna Bloodworth: Acute, new fractures, casts came off and now they have an unsupported fracture.

Lex Frieden: And those accidents may have been a result of their evacuation or associated symptoms?

Donna Bloodworth: We had a person with a hip fracture, which it's just-- that person was with their family up until-- that person was put on the bus because they knew their loved one had a problem and it was basically a new hip fracture. But there were certainly people who went through the water whose cast just came off. They lost their cane or their walker or their crutches, and that was interesting. We also had folks with cellulitis from exposure to the water, and their legs were just too painful to walk. There was also a group of people with disabilities. We saw folks with amputations, with strokes without a tremendous amount of impairment. I didn't see any person with a lot of impairment with a stroke, but persons with spinal cord injury, primarily paraplegia, amputations, and somehow-- and I suspect it was the savvy of the individual, they kept their mobility equipment with them. But there was some just very interesting mobility issues.

Lex Frieden: Well we know that many people were evacuated without their wheelchairs, and particularly those who needed power wheelchairs. Did some of those wind up at the Astrodome?

Donna Bloodworth: You know, I didn't see any power chairs that I remember. Perhaps one. But the folks I saw who had paraplegia were able to keep a hold of their wheelchairs. They were kind of picked up along the side of the road, I believe.

Lex Frieden: Jim, were you personally affected by the hurricanes, Katrina and Rita, other than your job?

Jim Laughlin: No, I was lucky. In both cases, they didn't affect the area I was in. However, I did contribute to the planning of transportation resources for both Katrina and Rita. One of the things that was interesting to talk about is the mobility equipment. The thing that we have to do, as people with disabilities, is realize that electric chairs are very difficult to transport. And when you're faced with thousands of people to transport in vehicles that may or may not be lift equipped, or equipped for transporting the person sitting in the chair. It would be a benefit if a person with an electric chair who had a folding chair, that they could have in readiness, if you will, for an event like Katrina.

Lex Frieden: Now Metro did transport people out of the danger zone prior to Hurricane Rita, right?

Jim Laughlin: Yes we did. We had a fleet of MetroLift vehicles that had been retired, as well as our primary fleet of vehicles that we, in conjunction with the City of Houston, Red Cross, and various emergency agencies, worked towards getting people transferred, first to George R. Brown, and some concentration or some stations, if you will, that they could then be evaluated and sent to various or more long term support centers, outside of the city. We had some up at A&M, Brenham, the surrounding areas, that accepted the people with disabilities.

Lex Frieden: Now did you transport people generally before the event, before the hurricane hit land, or were you doing it in the process of the storm?

Jim Laughlin: I don't think we had much of a chance to do it before. It was-- when I say before, we didn't do it five days before in anticipation of the storm. I think we were faced with 36 hours, 24 hours ahead of the storm, where the masses of people were also being evacuated. So the problem was compounded. They were trying to get just the general masses of people, either driving out of the city. Fuel, gasoline was a problem. Just so many cars on the freeway. It was a stoppage.

Lex Frieden: Were you dealing with people who had special needs, those with disabilities, differently than with the general population?

Jim Laughlin: Well, from a transportation perspective, you had to have a vehicle that could accommodate the people with disabilities, so yes, if they're ambulatory, we used taxicabs. We contracted with local cab companies. We had taxis driving three or four people out of town regularly. We had, like I say, our MetroLift vehicles that are equipped to handle four or five wheelchairs that we'd fill up and send to the airports, or to out of the city.

Lex Frieden: So you were essentially reserving the MetroLift for people with special needs, people who needed it.

Jim Laughlin: Yes, special needs, with wheelchairs, or other mobility issues.

Lex Frieden: Maggie, we've talked a lot about transportation here in the event of an evacuation. Are there other major issues that people have to face if there's need for evacuation?

Maggie Elestwani: Well I think the number one thing is to make sure that if you're an individual with special needs, to register with 2-1-1. I think that's probably the number one thing, in addition to preparing yourself and your family.

Lex Frieden: So 2-1-1, the city's effort to ensure that people have their names on a list, along with information about what their special needs might be. Maggie Elestwani: Yes, it's absolutely critical, because the 2-1-1 goes through a questionnaire where you're able to really communicate what your medical and functional capabilities are, and so that allows the city to plan appropriately for transportation.

Lex Frieden: So this is presumably an improvement over any kind of system that we may have or not had before hurricanes Katrina and Rita, right?

Maggie Elestwani: Oh, absolutely. We didn't have this type of program. And this is actually a nationwide program, 2-1-1, so it's very exciting for the nation to have this available. United Way is doing it across the nation.

Lex Frieden: Donna, I think as a physician seeing people with healthcare needs, there must be things that people can do to prepare themselves in the event that they must evacuate. I've heard you speak before about having a pack ready to go. Do you yourself have a pack ready to go?

Donna Bloodworth: I did my hurricane shopping on June 1st, so I'm ready, and I'm probably in the hunker down group. But as a physician, I haven't encouraged my patients to call 2-1-1 so as soon as I get back to my office, I need to put up a sign that says, Have you called 2-1-1? And any physician, I would encourage to do that.

Lex Frieden: I want to know what's in your pack.

Donna Bloodworth: My hurricane pack?

Lex Frieden: But I want to wait until after we're going to take a break here. And I'm sure people are just going to stand by holding their breath until we come back. This is Focus on Abilities. We appreciate you watching this special program about emergency preparedness and we'll be right back after this break.