

Inclusive Crisis Preparedness: Insights from a Crisis Exercise Involving People with Disabilities

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People with various types of disabilities are often excluded from involvement in crisis preparedness work due to their perceived vulnerability and need for assistance. Planning, crisis exercises, and risk analyses are frequently conducted without seeking input from individuals with disabilities, despite their unique understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses in crisis situations.

The objective of this study was to develop and implement a crisis exercise that brought together crisis management professionals from municipalities with individuals having various disabilities such as wheelchair users, blind people, and people with cognitive or intellectual disabilities. The participants were not informed about the exercise content or participant groups beforehand. A three-hour role-play scenario was performed in a city environment with researchers assuming different roles, facilitating the exercise and gathering data through field notes and photos. The crisis scenario involved contaminated water followed by a power blackout. The participants with disabilities were guided to a designated safety location operated by the crisis management professionals, where they could receive information, inquire about their needs, ask questions, and seek assistance. Subsequently, a debriefing session delved into collaboration specifics and lessons learned.

The outcome of the exercise was that the crisis management professionals gained valuable and sometimes unexpected insights from the questions and issues raised by the people with disabilities. They developed a deeper understanding of specific vulnerabilities within the group, such as the reliance on electricity for wheelchairs, the need to establish contact with family and assistants, concerns about other people and pets, and the necessity for immediate answers to avoid stress. They also recognized the importance of using a communication language that easily explains the situation for individuals with language or intellectual shortcomings. The individuals with disabilities actively supported one another while communicating with the professionals, demonstrating a profound understanding of each other's concerns. Participation in the crisis exercise provided them with a realistic and tangible understanding of how potential crisis scenarios could impact their lives.

To conclude, the exercise involving unprepared participants and prepared inputs resulted in an effective role play. It highlighted that people with disabilities are valuable resources in crisis management work, as they possess the most intimate knowledge of their own shortcomings and needs. Further, a recommendation is that crisis management professionals should actively develop activities, such as simulations or workshops, involving diverse groups of citizens to enhance their understanding of people's needs in various crisis situations. However, currently, there is a lack of training and suitable methods for these specific engagements.

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