NSW puts people with disability at the heart of disaster planning

Natural disasters like floods and bushfires are common place in Australia these days, but what isn’t talked about are the experiences of people with disability during these emergencies.

Recent research shows people with disability are at least twice as likely to die or be injured during a disaster – and in many cases purely due to a lack of planning.

The University of Sydney is partnering with the NSW State Office of Police and Emergency Services to put people with disability at the centre of disaster preparedness planning in New South Wales.

The team is working with disaster-prone communities in Sutherland, Taree and the Hawkesbury to help community organisations, individuals and families better prepare for natural disasters to ensure people with disability aren’t left behind.

Project lead Professor Gwynnyth Llewellyn from the University of Sydney’s Centre for Disability Research and Policy said international tragedies such as the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami, and Hurricane Katarina have shown the devastating impact these events can have on people with disability.

“Excluding people with disability from the planning process leaves them hugely vulnerable to a system that doesn’t understand their needs and experiences,” said Professor Llewellyn.

Professor Llewellyn is quick to reel off a list of unacceptable examples including emergency communications in non-accessible formats, evacuation procedures that don’t cater for people
using wheelchairs or with mobility challenges and temporary accommodation that cannot support essential equipment like ventilators.

“With Australia’s long history of floods, fires and storms, and with one in five people in NSW living with disability, it’s essential that we get this right,” she said.

The project will kick off with community workshops – starting in the Hawkesbury – where local councils, people with disability, community service organisations and local emergency managers will come together to discuss the strengths and barriers to carrying out disability-inclusive preparedness planning.

“As a community we need to be prepared to manage these risks for all members of our community, including populations that are more vulnerable due to both location and individual circumstances including disability.

“Whilst state and local volunteer resources are available to respond to emergencies, it is clear that losses and impacts can be minimised through knowledge sharing, preparation and collaboration.”

The researchers will use the information gathered to develop self-assessment tools for people with disability and community organisations to help them understand the risks and how to address them in advance – working together to ensure, coordinated local area action.

The project will also result in ‘resilience profiles’ for each community highlighting issues and providing resources to fill gaps, as well as the development of guidelines for Emergency Services.

---

**Participate in the project**

People with disability aged 18 to 60, and parents or carers, living in Sutherland, Taree and the Hawkesbury are invited to participate in this research program. Involvement will include attending two emergency preparedness workshops in your local area and completing a self-assessment questionnaire.

For more information visit:  

or contact Hayley Brooks, Project Manager on  
**disability.disaster@sydney.edu.au** or phone **02 9351 9152**
Keep up to date with how the project is going by following our social media!

https://www.facebook.com/disabilitynaturaldisasterstudy

@PWD_DRR

This project is a partnership led by the University of Sydney’s Centre for Disability Research and Policy and School of Geosciences, and is funded under the 2014 joint State/Commonwealth Natural Disaster Resilience Scheme.