

## *Introduction*

# Applying the ‘Disaster Lens’ to Older Adults

*By Jenny Campbell, guest editor*

Katrina. Rita. September 11. The Chicago Heat Wave of 1995. The tsunami of 2005. All were disasters of extraordinary scope and brutality. Each had a profound impact upon older adults, their families, and the professionals charged with their care and rescue. Disasters, by definition, create an abundance of needs and a scarcity of resources. Tragically, disasters also amplify vulnerabilities and expose gaps in planning and service delivery. For example, older adults constituted only 15 percent of the population in New Orleans before Katrina, but after the event they accounted for 70 percent of the dead. During this unprecedented disaster, more than 700,000 older adults left their homes, their nursing homes, and their assisted living facilities. Issues of race, class, and privilege permeate their stories. Moving beyond the riveting stories of massive loss, we now have an opportunity to learn how and why older adults are rendered more vulnerable both during and after a disaster than is the general population. We have a unique opportunity to use this “disaster lens” to glean important lessons and find areas for improvement.

So, while we are still engaged in the long, hard work of rebuilding communities devastated by

recent disasters, we must understand what went wrong and commit ourselves to applying these lessons learned. Ultimately, we have an opportunity to work toward a future where the most vulnerable will not be forgotten.

This issue of *Generations* is designed to offer a provocative overview of the different aspects of disasters and their impact on older adults and on the communities in which they live. It is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, as these very articles were being written and prepared for press, multiple disasters occurred—wildfires in San Diego, an earthquake in Peru, a bridge collapse in Minnesota. Each disaster affected older adults differently and brought different problems to light. The current issue focuses primarily on the lessons learned from the hurricanes of 2005 that devastated the Gulf States region. We use other disasters, including September 11 and those that occurred overseas, to focus attention on issues that affect older adults wherever they live and whatever the disaster. The articles included here interweave first-person accounts with more formal discussions about the complexity of disasters and the scope of the problems encountered for older adults. Some of the articles are educational, some experiential, and oth-

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*What are the lessons?*

*Take a look at*

*your own community*

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ers pose hard questions that are yet to be answered. All the authors were chosen because of their personal, firsthand experience with older adults and disasters—and because of their passionate voices. While some of those heard in this volume are practitioners, others are policy makers or academics, and still others are older adults who have experienced what it was like to be part of a disaster.

The volume is divided into four sections.

Section I begins with the first of a series of first-person accounts gleaned from older survivors of Katrina who were interviewed by Croom, Jenkins, and Eddy. The article depicts an older adult's decision to stay in New Orleans and not evacuate—a decision she made initially in concert with one neighbor, and then in accordance with the needs of her community. This theme of interconnectedness will resonate throughout these chapters.

Section II is a collection of articles and first-person accounts about what happens during the initial response to a disaster. This section starts with the presentation of a rapid-needs-assessment model for triaging the needs of older adults in a disaster situation (by Burnett, Dyer, and Pickens). The Seniors Without Families Triage (SWIFT) instrument featured in the article was used for elders evacuated to Houston's Astrodome during the hurricanes of 2005. A copy of the authors' instrument is included at the end of the article. Two articles follow, detailing the medical (Rothman and Brown) and mental health issues (Brown) of older adults both during and after a disaster. Echoing the anguish of mental health issues that can arise from a disaster, there is a first-person account of the decision to leave a pet behind.

While the previous articles primarily address older adults living in the community, the next article outlines the challenges faced by older adults who reside in nursing homes or assisted living facilities (Hyer, Polivka-West, and Brown). As the authors discuss, sheltering in place or evacuating are both options that carry significant risks. Policies concerning the status of nursing homes and assisted living facilities and their relationship to emergency services before, during, and after a disaster are complex and can vary widely in different locations. The authors

of this article discuss specific examples of states that have improved their integration of these nursing homes into overall community disaster management plans. This article also summarizes the results of the milestone Nursing Home Hurricane Summit convened by the Florida Health Care Association. Section II closes with an overview of what we have learned about older adults and disasters (Pekovic, Seff, and Rothman).

Section III opens with a moving account of September 11 and the impact of that disaster on older adults living in New York City (Jellinek and Willig). It details how the unfolding implications of this disaster helped to highlight the vulnerabilities of older adults, especially those who were unconnected to formal organizations. This article is followed by a first-person account of a worker in the aging services system in New Orleans, her efforts to locate her clients after the hurricanes, and then the arduous process of helping them navigate a complex and often chaotic process to achieve basic housing and services.

The next article details the efforts of the University of New Orleans to take a proactive approach by starting planning for the next evacuation immediately following Katrina. The university convened older adults and service providers, and started with the premise that older adults will choose to stay or go based on their own risk assessment. If older adults feel safer in their homes, then they will not evacuate. Acknowledging long-standing challenges for older adults living in New Orleans prior to the storms of 2005, the authors highlight how these factors increased vulnerability (Jenkins, Laska, and Williamson). Their article is followed by a first-person account of a senior services worker who is also an older adult. She chronicles her work in rebuilding the capacity of her agency to meet the emerging needs of post-disaster New Orleans, over the long term. Finally, this section closes with a look at older adults who were forced to evacuate to Houston and ended up calling Houston home (James).

Section IV takes a longer view of disaster. First, a thoughtful article outlines an international perspective on aging issues and details varying international efforts to effectively plan for disasters (Barrett). Msgr. Charles Fahey next

provides a provocative look at ethical considerations in a disaster, set against the backdrop of the trial of nursing home owners where thirty-four elderly residents drowned in their beds following Katrina. The penultimate article presents Elmore and Brown's analysis of the health and policy implications of disaster planning for older adults.

Last is an article in which I explore the impact of the hurricanes of 2005 on older adults in the Gulf States and echo the theme of interconnectedness for older adults during a disaster and the need to attend to both belonging and belongings. This sense of belonging—a connection to a family, a community, or a social service system—is a vital aspect of the safety net in times of danger. The fear of what will happen to belongings—dear and vital possessions that hold history and comfort and security for the future—also affects how older adults will respond in a disaster.

I hope you will use this issue as an invitation to apply the disaster lens to your own community. The disaster lens requires addressing hard questions. It requires that we divert precious funds into planning for “what ifs” instead of “what is.” It also requires that we think creatively about potential threats, the impact of those threats and how to mitigate them in a dizzying array of possible scenarios. Finally, it asks that we face harsh realities about race, class, and privilege and vigilantly challenge planning that does not accommodate those who have neither resources nor a voice at the table. Using the disaster lens means fighting abstract problems with often abstract answers, combined with a prayer that if these disaster plans are ever put to the test—the vulnerable populations they encompass will fare well. Challenge yourself to look anew at old problems, at assumptions, and at the unique confluence of needs that a disaster can invoke. We have much to learn about how the worst of times can inform ongoing efforts to create the best of times. ☪

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Edward Thompson,  
*Guest Editor*

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