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Emergency Preparedness Is a Job for All

Court ruling in Los Angeles disabilities case teaches a broader lesson

With the horrific suffering caused by natural disasters in Japan and New Zealand saturating news outlets and social media sites, many of us have begun to examine our personal emergency preparedness plans and those of our cities and states. Almost simultaneously with the earthquake in Christchurch in February, a lawsuit about emergency preparedness was being decided in California.

Brought against the city of Los Angeles on behalf of the nearly 1 million Angelenos with disabilities, the suit claims that the city failed to provide for the disabled in its emergency preparedness plans and, as such, violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and other federal and state laws.

The court agreed, holding that Los Angeles failed to ensure accessible emergency evacuation, transportation, notification, and emergency shelters, making the disabled “disproportionately vulnerable to harm in the event of an emergency or disaster.”

For its part, the city argued that it does have a “plan,” though it consists mostly of general information on how people with disabilities should be treated. “Specifics need to be in place as to what can be done by whom and in what situations,” disability policy consultant June Kailes says. Los Angeles has been ordered to create those specific plans, which include coverage for people with communication difficulties.

Speech-generating devices, or SGDs, are used by non-verbal people, though non-native speakers might also employ them. Experts agree that it may not be feasible to build a single SGD to communicate across multiple emergency response scenarios (such as in ambulances, ERs, and shelters) because the devices are highly customized to the individual. But SGDs may be one of several tools.

“During a small-scale emergency, first responders can take more time and be creative,” Kailes says. “But as the scale of the emergency escalates, not as many options are available.”

From word prediction to visual voicemail, productivity software to text-to-speech, new apps that overcome communication barriers are being released regularly for smart phones and tablets. While traditional SGDs may always be critical technology for some, as the availability and variety of mobile apps increase, more users may rely on these products instead of traditional assistive technology (AT). Moreover, because so many people have mobile devices, government agencies now can alert people of impending emergencies.

Nonetheless, nothing can substitute for personal preparedness, and individuals should be proactive in

creating their own plans. Manufacturers can be part of the solution by addressing the following issues:

1. Alternative Power Supply: Powering devices during extended outages is a major concern for all people. SGDs, AT, and mobile devices that require power are useless unless a source of electricity is available. Thus, manufacturers should emphasize the importance of alternative power sources and provide options for charging the devices, such as battery power, car lighter adapters, USB, traditional AC, and even solar-powered bags.

2. Manual Communication Board: With the purchase of each SGD, manufacturers should include a laminated manual communication board for emergencies. Or, at a minimum, manufacturers should provide instructions on how to create your own manual board, for inclusion in emergency kits.

3. Replacement and/or Loaner Policy: Just as pharmacies and insurance companies should have policies in place to provide prescription medication to disaster victims who

are forced to leave home without medication, SGD makers should have policies, in conjunction with insurance carriers, that set forth criteria and the availability of replacement or loaner SGDs. Specifics should be included on how and where users can obtain the replacement SGDs and how providers of the equipment would be reimbursed.

As for personal preparedness, redundancy is key. Individuals should compile multiple emergency kits, including go-bags, as well as car, bedside, and home kits. Each one should include alternative power supplies and hard copies of important documents and phone numbers. People of all abilities should get involved and take part in community emergency response training. “[People with disabilities] are not being invited to the table,” says Sarah W. Blackstone, president of Augmentative Communication Inc.’s Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Communication Enhancement (AAC-RERC). “They may not even know there is a table.”

Being prepared for emergencies and disasters is now mandated on a governmental level, at least in Los Angeles. It’s good advice all of us can use. ☒

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