



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

In the Game of “What if?,” Are You Ready? Planning evacuation for vulnerable populations

by Jacob Bustad

The 9/11 terrorist attacks and more recently the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina may have occurred far from Kansas, but the need for proper emergency preparedness in all states was made clear by these events. Included in this emergency preparedness is the need for evacuation planning, a lack of which can lead to tragic consequences like those in the Gulf Coast. It is important to remember that while most of the population may be able to evacuate on their own terms, the vulnerable populations of that same area—including the elderly, the disabled, those with limited English proficiency, and other populations that are considered transportation-service dependent—require strategies for evacuation by the transit services involved.

Both KDOT and the Kansas Rural Transit Assistance Program (KRTAP) are providing assistance to the rural transit providers that would likely be part of a team of responders to transport vulnerable populations in case of an emergency. The purpose of the technical support is to strengthen and develop the partnerships between local emergency planning committees and local transit agencies.

While the likelihood of a hurricane affecting Kansas is practically

nonexistent, many other emergencies need to be considered when developing preparedness plans for a given area. The U.S. Department of Transportation lists 11 possible emergency categories, including biological, chemical, nuclear and terrorist attacks, as well as natural



disasters ranging from earthquake and flooding to tornadoes and winter storms. Although the specific challenges involved in each of these scenarios might change, the efforts needed to locate and transport vulnerable populations are always essential.

Vulnerable populations

Vulnerable populations contain

individuals who require specific considerations in emergency transportation planning, including some older adults, people with physical, hearing, visual, psychiatric, intellectual, learning and cognitive disabilities, people with limited English proficiency, and persons of low incomes. These populations are expected to continue to rise, especially the older population. A U.S. DOT strategy paper estimates that by 2030 the population of persons 65 and older will double—this only makes the issue more important. The lack of English proficiency is noted because of a high correlation between this population and the use of community and public transportation. Language barriers can be a critical problem for these individuals, because it can keep them from gaining information during an emergency and they may not have access to private transportation in an emergency.

The first step in evacuation planning, then, is to identify people needing transportation assistance, made easier through a well-developed partnership network in the community. The agencies and organizations involved, from transportation providers to health and human services and even

local faith-based organizations, can work together to both locate these populations and establish what transportation resources would be needed.

Disabled and senior citizens

One aspect of evacuation planning that

Your agency may be able to handle day to day transportation for citizens with disabilities and limited mobility, but what if they need to be transported all at once?

emerged from Katrina was the need for special consideration of the challenge involved when moving people from hospital, nursing home and other medical facilities. A recent federal GAO report detailed the efforts made for these populations during Hurricane Charley in Florida and Katrina in Mississippi, and concluded that the basic decision of whether or not to evacuate a facility is just one of many challenges. Although state and local governments can order evacuations, health care facilities are sometimes exempt from these orders. This again highlights the need for cooperation between all groups involved in emergency planning; many of the officials interviewed stressed the lack of transportation resources because local demand for transportation in an emergency would likely exceed supply. Also, the transportation resources available may not be able to properly serve members of these populations, who have specific mobility needs. Finally, these populations present a unique challenge in that the evacuation-receiving facility would need to be able to accommodate potential residents for a long period of time.

The above challenges highlight the need for comprehensive planning that considers every angle, eliminating as many potential problems as possible. It's often said that in emergencies, the most dangerous element is what you don't know.

Resources

Several resources are available for anyone involved in emergency preparedness and evacuation planning. The U.S. DOT Web site offers a page with information about emergency planning and the disabled, at www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/asp/emergencyprep.asp, that also provides direct links to the strategy paper and checklist recently released by the DOT. The checklist outlines steps to effectively

prepare for an emergency, and separates these steps between those taken during planning, when an emergency is imminent, during the emergency, and during recovery operations. This last phase of recovery is another good example for receiving the potential benefits of emergency planning, as transportation resources could be situated where they could assist in recovery efforts.

To find out more about these efforts in Kansas, the United We Ride's Kansas Web site, www.ksunitedweride.org, provides information and contacts. One of the current goals of United We Ride is to establish five regional sites as pilots for evacuation coordination planning, and then to develop a one-day training module that will be based on hazard and security planning training packages. The goal through this type of training is the cooperation of all agencies and organizations involved, which means proper evacuation planning can be achieved and the dangers of the unknown avoided.

Sources:

Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities. www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/asp/emergencyprep.asp

Strategies In Emergency Preparedness for Transportation-Dependent Populations. National Consortium on the Coordination of Human Services Transportation, <http://www.dotcr.ost.dot.gov/Documents/Emergency/Emergency%20Preparedness%20Strategy%20Paper.doc>

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Preliminary Observations on the Evacuation of Vulnerable Populations due to Hurricanes and Other Disasters. US Government Accountability Office Report. <http://www.gao.gov/htext/d06790t.html>

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