

Self-Advocacy and Being Disaster Ready

When you are ready for the next emergency that comes, you are more likely to be able to get through it faster or easier. That's called disaster resilience. An important part of being disaster resilient is learning how to ask for what you need and knowing what resources will become available. That's called self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy might include talking with people and organizations so they know who you are and what you'll need to stay safe if there's a disaster. It can also include knowing your rights and asking the right questions to the right people so you can advocate for your needs and your rights.

What everyone can do

Regardless of your situation, there are certain self-advocacy steps everyone can take so they're better prepared for disasters and emergencies.

Know your rights

It's important to know what your rights are ahead of time so that, when an event happens, you already know what should be provided and what you should do. Included below are some of your rights that you should be aware of. Understand your rights so you are in a better position to advocate for yourself.

Local government: When there's a disaster or emergency, local governments are obligated to implement disaster response and recovery measures. Contact the relevant local emergency management departments and ask them about their response and recovery plans, and how your needs will be met to ensure meaningful access to supports and services.

Housing: Whether you're a renter or a homeowner, you should understand the applicable protections and options you have if there's a disaster or emergency. Learn more about your [housing rights during a disaster](#). Also, [read your contracts](#) so you know things like what you're responsible for and what your insurance will cover.

Healthcare: Figure out what alternatives exist and have a plan so you continue to have access to [healthcare](#), [medications](#), and [mental health care](#) if services are disrupted. If you require continuity of power for life-sustaining equipment or medications, ask your providers what your options are for back-up power sources

if you are forced to shelter-in-place for a sustained period of time without electricity.

Employment: As an employee, learn about the protections certain [employment laws](#) offer if there's a disaster or emergency, and ask your employer about disaster and emergency plans for the location where you work. Also, be familiar with what unemployment resources are available, like [Disaster Unemployment Assistance](#).

Education: Independent school districts and higher education institutions have an obligation to keep students, staff, and visitors safe. Ask what the Emergency Operation Plan is for the facility/location and how accommodations can or will be made for individual needs or in certain types of events. See [SchoolSafety.gov's Emergency Planning info](#) to learn more.

After a disaster or emergency, when K-12 education activities resume, they should be accessible to all students, including students with disabilities. When K-12 students are displaced and will be attending a new school, the new school must still provide all applicable programming.

When institutions of higher education resume instruction, students with disabilities should have meaningful access to the same instruction as all students.

Consumer protections: There are bad actors out there who will try to exploit a disaster or emergency by scamming you. Understand [scams and fraud](#) so you know what to look for and how to avoid them. And be aware of how to protect yourself from identify theft.

Emergency Ready Sheet

The easy-to-use [Emergency Ready Sheet](#) helps you keep your important information in one document so you can react quickly to disasters and emergencies. And, when you create an Emergency Ready Sheet, you may get preparedness ideas you hadn't thought about before.

Once you create your Emergency Ready Sheet, just download it to your device or put a printed copy in your Go Bag. Then, when an event occurs, you can use your Emergency Ready Sheet when you're advocating for the supports and services that are right for you.

Getting disaster help

If a disaster or emergency strikes, help could be available from local, state, and federal entities. Get familiar with the types of [disaster assistance provided by government agencies](#) and local nonprofits.

Also, to help you stay safe, healthy, and independent if there's an event, ask the relevant people and organizations how they'll continue to support you. This could be in the form of things like continued access to:

- medical equipment,
- personal care attendant services,
- prescriptions,
- accessible transportation,
- etc.

Community living

If you live independently in the community, take control and make sure you're prepared for disasters. You'll want to [stay informed about disasters and emergencies](#), build an emergency kit, create a disaster preparedness plan, and practice, practice, practice.

Who to include

When creating your plan, include other people who might be involved in your day-to-day life, like family members and friends, direct care workers, and providers. When talking to your providers, ask them about their back-up plans for situations that could affect you.

Local organizations

Contact your local emergency management department so they know who you are, where you live, and how they will support you and your specific needs in case there's a disaster or emergency. Ask about their plans for transportation (including evacuation), emergency shelters, and sheltering in place (e.g., wellness checks, food and water distribution, and back-up power). Also, ask about how to get local disaster and emergency alerts.

Some jurisdictions might utilize [STEAR \(State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry\)](#). This is a voluntary registry that Texans with disabilities can opt-in to to

provide information about their specific needs so the city/county can help with planning and preparedness.

It is important to understand that this registry does NOT guarantee services. In your advocacy to facilitate your autonomy and independence, you should ask the local jurisdiction, emergency management department, how this information in STEAR will be used to provide notice or inquiry about real time needs and how/what services will be made accessible to you.

Other entities to connect with are your utility providers (water, electric, and gas). Ask how to get their alerts, how you will receive notices about disruptions and restoration, and additional resources if they become available. Also, if you or a loved one relies on medical devices for life-sustaining measures or a medical condition, get added to the critical care registry.

Group setting

If you live in a group setting, like a group home or an institution, the facility that you reside in should have plans in place for how it will respond to certain events and how it will continue to provide care if there's a disaster or emergency. However, just because the facility develops the plan, that doesn't mean you can't take an active role in your own disaster preparedness.

Ask questions

It's important to know how the facility plans to continue to provide care and keep you safe, and the best way for you to know is by asking questions. Below are some things you can ask.

Plan: What is the facility's disaster plan?

Exercises: Does the facility conduct disaster preparedness exercises, and, if so, how often are they conducted and with who?

Alternatives: If the facility is damaged or loses power, what alternatives will be made available? Some examples are below.

- If the facility provides mental health services, how will you continue to access these services?
- If it's a housing provider and the facility can no longer be lived in, how will you be relocated?

- If it's a healthcare provider, how will they ensure continuity of care?

Your preferences

Once you know how your facility plans to respond to a disaster or an emergency, you can start to think through the different scenarios and how you would like to be supported in these different scenarios.

Think about your needs and preferences and communicate these things to the people who develop your facility's disaster preparedness plans. Your needs and preferences could be related to healthcare, mental health care, or any other service the facility provides.