



## North Shore News Column.

### Older & Wiser

By Tom Carney

# Consider B.C. seniors in natural disaster planning

By Tom Carney, Special to North Shore News July 7, 2013

THE weather outside can be, well, frightful.

Albertans living in proximity to the Bow River can attest to that.

Natural disasters are not new but weather extremes are causing more and more natural disasters all around the world and Canada is no exception. And, they are a growing threat to human populations, particularly to vulnerable populations such as the elderly.

Research shows that people older than 60 are far more likely to be hurt or killed in a disaster. Of course, not all seniors are vulnerable and in fact across North America seniors are in the forefront of disaster planning specifically because of their life experience.

We know that seniors who live alone or who have few contacts are the least informed about impending emergencies. Once a disaster strikes, reduced mobility, dependence on caregivers and medications, unfamiliarity with emergency procedures, and even an unwillingness to leave pets or belongings behind can contribute to keeping seniors in their homes when it's safer to evacuate.

Following a crisis, seniors may be reluctant to seek help because of the stigmas of asking for help or because they feel that others are more in need of those services.

Coping with disasters requires preparation. People with well-thought-out emergency plans respond better to disaster situations than those without.

The North Shore Emergency Management Office is an inter-municipal agency charged with providing emergency management services for the three North Shore municipalities. I spoke recently, by telephone, with Dorit Mason, the director of the office.

I asked her what seniors could do to prepare for an emergency. She had three suggestions.

Seniors should make sure they have enough spare medications on hand to last at least seven days.

Next, Mason recommends seniors establish a safety net or personal support network of family, friends, relatives and neighbours who could assist at a moment's notice.

Finally, Mason recommends seniors have a grab and go kit, which is designed to be readily available in the event of having to leave your premises quickly. For a list of what to include in the kit, visit the North Shore Emergency

Management Office's website, nsemo.org, and click on "Preparedness" then "Emergency Kits and Supplies."

As I was researching this topic it became clear that minimizing the disaster vulnerability of the elderly requires a solid understanding of the specific needs and traits of the elderly population and identification of the risk factors that lead to their vulnerability.

A report from the American Society of Civil Engineers makes the point that "effective disaster policies and programs will specifically target elderly populations, establish strong connections between the elderly and available resources and evaluate the efforts to ensure that vulnerabilities are being modified."

In 2010, there were an estimated 677,770 seniors living in British Columbia. Almost half of all seniors in B.C. have a disability and approximately one-third of them have mobility challenges. If those numbers don't send a shiver down the spine of those responsible for disaster planning in this province I don't know what will.

Clearly, given those statistics, we need to put seniors front and centre when it comes to our disaster planning.

I concluded my conversation with Mason by asking whether the North Shore Emergency Management Office has any literature to help seniors better prepare themselves for a disaster in our community.

Not at this time was her response, however she recognized it as a need and something that will be addressed.

Tom Carney is the executive director of the Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Contact him at 604-985-3852 or send an email to lions\_view@telus.net.