

Older and Wiser: Natural disasters disproportionately impact seniors

Older people need to be prepared for emergencies before they happen, writes columnist Margaret Coates

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A BC Ambulance crew passes in front of a hospital emergency department. This has been a difficult year for seniors in B.C., writes columnist Margaret Coates. BCEHS/Twitter

I do not know about you, but I remember this summer was especially difficult for seniors.

Notwithstanding the continuing impacts of COVID-19, seniors in British Columbia dealt with disasters such as a severe heat dome, forest fires, and if not fires directly, heavy smoke from fires around the province. These three major events were in many ways catastrophic for seniors, with many seniors having died or been hospitalized with severe respiratory infections.

A major study from the Canadian Red Cross, entitled *Closing the Gaps: Advancing Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery for Older Adults*, released in December 2020, said that “Older adults consistently experience the greatest proportion of casualties during and after emergencies in Canada, and internationally, when compared to younger age groups.”

This was recognized in a June 30, 2021, North Shore News article, where it was reported that in B.C., the chief coroner reported 719 sudden deaths over one week during the recent heat wave – three times the usual number. The article said that seniors were disproportionately affected by the heat dome saying, “those who died suddenly during the heat wave were more likely to be older people with underlying health conditions who lived alone in private apartments, with minimal ventilation.”

We, of course, know that most of the deaths, particularly in the beginning of COVID-19, were in adults 60 years of age and older, with the greatest proportion of deaths occurring in long-term care and retirement homes. With the increasing vaccination of older adults, deaths in this age group are decreasing.

But it may be a good strategy for those working on emergency preparedness and in long-term care facilities to consider the effects of major pandemics on older people and how organizations, individuals, and caregivers can be better prepared. For example, we need to look at protocols that protect older people in care facilities ahead of a pandemic or disaster.

Public Safety Canada has reported that natural disasters are increasing in frequency and severity across Canada, because of climate change. So, we can expect heat waves, forest fires (and its attendant smoke issues), droughts, and serious and heavy rainfalls.

Based on unanticipated disasters and on the disasters prevalent this summer, many municipalities are looking at upgrading or creating emergency preparedness plans to mitigate issues, especially for vulnerable populations.

Here at home, North Shore Emergency Management, as an inter-municipal agency, has provided emergency management services for the city and district of North Vancouver and the District of West Vancouver since 1978.

This year they have begun a process to look at emergency preparedness especially for vulnerable populations such as seniors. They have joined forces with the Seniors Working Group, a coalition of North Shore organizations, to further the conversation.

In the December study I referenced earlier, the authors make several recommendations at the individual, organizational, community and governmental levels for disaster preparedness. Among other things, they stress the importance of seniors, or their caregivers, taking some responsibility for being ready in an emergency.

So, what can we do to prepare? Many online sites have similar information about what you can do, such as assembling a disaster kit, and planning for evacuation. It is advised that a kit contain supplies such as food, water, clothing, medications, batteries, and chargers, and a list of emergency phone contacts, family, and friends. Organizations such as the Red Cross have ready-made disaster kits.

The websites also suggest documenting all your important papers and medications. In addition, try to arrange to have a 30-day supply of medications – hard to do in B.C. because of restrictions on health plans, but perhaps work with your doctor to see if it can be done.

Be prepared to shelter in place with your disaster kit and/or get to a shelter, if necessary, by knowing where they might be located and knowing transportation options if you cannot drive. If you receive home care, speak with your case manager to see what their plan is in times of emergency and how they can assist with your plan.

The North Shore Emergency Management website (nsem.ca) has advice about plans and safety kits. They can also be reached at 778-338-6300.

Always keep neighbours, friends and family informed about your whereabouts. Giving a key to your place to a family member or trustworthy friend is a good option.

I remember a Scouts and Guides motto: "Be prepared." Not a bad axiom for us – think ahead and get disaster prepared.

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors' Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 51 years and has worked for and with seniors for 26 of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome – email lions_view@telus.net.