



Home for the Holidays

How Will I Know Mom and Dad are Okay? *Staying In Touch in Crisis Situations*

In the event of an emergency or disaster, how will you know that your older loved one is okay? Whether it's Mom or Dad or Aunt Jane and Uncle Bob, you never know when a crisis may hit home. A hurricane in Florida, wildfire in Arizona, flood in Tennessee or a blizzard in Minnesota — it seems as if most of the nation has faced a natural disaster of some proportion in the past few years. Beyond natural disasters, however, older adults may face a more personal and immediate crisis that requires an emergency response. How would you know Mom or Dad was okay if disaster struck? As families get together over the holiday season, this time of year provides a good opportunity to discuss how to handle critical events with older family members. By establishing a plan, families can stay “**IN TOUCH**” with older loved ones and be prepared when a crisis situation occurs. The **Eldercare Locator**, a nationwide service funded by the U.S. Administration on Aging to link older adults and their families to local aging services, provides the following suggestions.

Keep in mind...

- Though among the most vulnerable members of our society, many older adults today are living healthy, independent lives. Yet, sometimes they might need some assistance.
- Age-related characteristics, such as delayed response time, reduced ability to see or hear, and difficulty reading print too small, can affect an older person's perception and reaction.
- Physical or mental impairments can limit a person's ability to respond quickly or seek help in an emergency.
- Chronic health conditions, such as arthritis or diabetes, can make access to transportation or the availability of food and medication particularly important for older adults.
- Limited financial resources may impact a person's ability to maintain a safe environment or adequately prepare for natural disasters or other emergency situations.
- Language and cultural differences may limit some older adults' ability to understand and communicate effectively in a crisis situation.

The “**IN TOUCH**” Plan Overview

- I**dentify potential emergency situations
- N**ote community resources
- T**alk about individual circumstances
- O**utline your plan in writing
- U**date as situations change
- C**ommunicate regularly and test
- H**ave peace of mind

Developing Your “IN TOUCH” Plan

Whether you live far away or are directly caring for your loved one, an “IN TOUCH” plan will aid your family communications efforts before, during and after a crisis situation. Following are some key elements for you and your older loved one to consider in developing your plan.

Identify potential emergency situations and disasters that could occur in your older family member’s home and community.

- Examine the physical condition of the residence to identify any safety hazards that could cause personal injury. Things to look for include: fire threats in faulty appliances and wiring; working condition of fire extinguishers and smoke alarms; poor lighting and loose handrails in stairways; and the possible need for grab bars in bathrooms and non-skid rugs to help prevent falls. Check outside as well for trees that could hit the house in a storm, walkway hazards, low hanging wires, etc.
- Investigate the safety and security of the neighborhood. Is crime a problem? How far away are the police and fire departments? Is there a neighborhood watch group?
- Contact the local emergency management agency, such as the Red Cross, and find out about possible major disasters in the area, like earthquakes, wildfires, floods, hurricanes, blizzards, ice storms or other severe weather. Learn about the community’s early warning and evacuation signals, and determine the safest evacuation routes and nearby shelters.
- Determine back-up systems in the event of an electrical power outage — especially for any medical equipment that is being used. Also, the lack of heat in winter and air conditioning in the summer can pose serious health risks.

Note what community resources are available that might assist your efforts in establishing your “IN TOUCH” plan.

- Contact the local **State or Area Agency on Aging** to link to a range of services that help older adults remain healthy and independent. The **Eldercare Locator** (1-800-677-1116, www.eldercare.gov) can put you in touch with the agencies that serve your area. Daily services like homemaker support, personal care, home health care, telephone reassurance, transportation, and home-delivered meals, can provide crucial assistance in an emergency situation.
- Find out if your relative is involved with any informal community networks such as homeowners associations, neighborhood watch groups, faith organizations and senior centers. Ask about neighbors, friends and other acquaintances with whom your relative socializes. Ask your loved one to identify individuals they would like to assist them. Establish a priority system among these contacts for various types of emergencies.
- Record information about your loved one’s medical professionals and emergency contacts. Ensure that your elder and all key contacts have an updated copy.
- Contact your local emergency information management office to see if it maintains a register of people with disabilities who would need to be located and assisted quickly in a disaster.
- Identify what resources are available to transport and shelter pets if needed.

Talk about individual circumstances that are concerns for you and your older loved one.

- Listen. Find out about your elder family member's needs and concerns to avoid preconceived solutions. Older persons have a lifetime of experience in managing adversity. Have them provide input into the plan; don't impose it on them. Even in an emergency situation, they also may be a resource in helping others.
- Be considerate of any sensitivities or resistance your loved one might have to wanting help or involving others in their personal business. Discuss why an "IN TOUCH" plan is important for both of you and for the entire family.
- Talk about the requirements for special needs. Hearing or visual loss could require special communication devices. Consider how medical equipment, like oxygen or an electric wheelchair, would be moved in an emergency or disaster situation.
- Determine the capability and comfort level of communicating via technical devices such as computers, pagers, cell phones, Blackberry, etc. What is practical for your situation? Also, the local **Area Agency on Aging** can help you identify what communication channels are available if these traditional devices fail during a major emergency.
- Determine how your loved one can signal for help if needed. Consider the usefulness of an electronic Personal Emergency Response System (PERS), which can be worn and activated to summon help. Consider also location-tracking devices such as the On-Star system in automobiles, or other wireless technology integrated into watches, pagers and cell phones.
- Make sure your older relative maintains emergency supplies of food, water, and medications.

Outline your "IN TOUCH" plan in writing and share it with everyone involved.

- Keep the plan simple and easy to use. All that might be needed is a page or two, typed in an easy to read format that can be posted for easy access.
- Reach agreement on who will be a part of your "IN TOUCH" team. In addition to family members, a neighbor, friend, clergy, doctor or local organization might be appropriate to include. Obtain permission from each person to include him or her in the plan. List their names and contact information. Indicate each of their roles and the situation for which they should be contacted. Make sure each team member receives a copy of the plan.
- Identify at least two key contact persons:
 1. A family contact for the older person in case of an emergency; and
 2. The first person the family would contact to check to make sure the older loved one is okay. In case of a major disaster situation, also identify a third person who lives in a different state that both parties can check in with, as it is usually easier to call long-distance. As appropriate, these contacts should have access to pertinent personal documents about your elder relative, such as financial, legal, insurance, health care and long-term care information that might be needed in an emergency.
- Include notes about things to remember. This should include a list of prescriptions and other medications regularly used, medical equipment instructions, name of doctor, arrangements for a pet, the local hospital to contact, and other such concerns.

Update your “IN TOUCH” plan as situations change.

- Review your “IN TOUCH” plan with your team, as a group if possible, to insure that everyone is committed and understands their role.
- Realize that a success factor of any plan is maintaining current contact information. Encourage each team member to help by notifying each other of any changes. Update your plan at least once a year.
- Take note of any physical or medical needs of your older loved one that might require a change in your plan. For instance, if your older loved one stops driving and requires transportation, then consider how this service can fit into your plan. Taking advantage of community services now could help in the event of an emergency situation later.
- Reassess your ability and that of your contacts to be available when needed. Personal or professional situations can change at any time.

Communicate regularly and test your “IN TOUCH” plan.

- Check with your “IN TOUCH” team regularly. Even an occasional surprise call might help determine strengths or weakness in your plan. For example, there could be a problem if you can only get an answering machine when you call one of your contacts, or there is a long delay in receiving a return call.
- Use family gatherings as an opportunity to review your plan, and even share it with other family members for their information. You might inspire someone else to follow your lead.
- Test elements of your plan occasionally. You can check that electrical and mobile communications tools are operating properly or walk through an evacuation drill with your loved one.

Have peace of mind knowing that you have an “IN TOUCH” plan.

- Stay calm. If an emergency situation arises, follow your plan.
- Don't panic should the plan not work exactly as anticipated. If one contact cannot be reached at the time needed, be confident that you have included other resources.
- Take an opportunity following an emergency situation to evaluate your plan. Be honest about what worked and what did not. Seek input from your loved one and your team. Change what needs to be changed. Then update and redistribute your “IN TOUCH” plan.

State and Area Agencies on Aging are uniquely positioned to help older adults and their caregivers find local resources and supportive services. Contact:

The Eldercare Locator
1-800-677-1116
www.eldercare.gov

A public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging

My "IN TOUCH" Plan

Identify potential emergency situations (Home, neighborhood, natural disasters)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Note community resources (Area Agency on Aging, informal networks, doctors, pets)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Talk about individual circumstances (Concerns, special needs, medical equipment, communications)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Outline plan in writing (Key contacts, pertinent information, things to remember, distribute copies)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Udate as situations change (List review date and changes)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Communicate regularly and test (Check with team, share with family, test)

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____

Have peace of mind.

ELDERCARE
Locator

Contact the **Eldercare Locator** at **1-800-677-1116** Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. EST or through the Web site at **www.eldercare.gov**.

The **Eldercare Locator** is a public service of the Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging in cooperation with the National Association of State Units on Aging.

Here are some services that can assist your family member

Adult Day Care

Social, recreational and health services provided in a protective setting to individuals who cannot be left alone because of health care need, confusion or disability.

Information and Referral/Assistance Information Services (I&R/A)

Specialists provide assistance and linkage to available services and resources.

Case Management

Case managers work with family members to assess the needs of seniors and arrange for services to assist them to remain independent.

Elder Abuse Prevention Programs

Allegations of abuse, neglect and exploitation of senior citizens are investigated by protective service specialists. Intervention is provided in substantiated cases of abuse, neglect or exploitation.

Emergency Response Systems

Provides in-home 24-hour electronic alarm systems that enable home-bound persons to summon emergency help.

Employment Services

Helps older adults explore employment opportunities.

Financial Assistance

Benefit programs include energy assistance, financial management counseling, food stamps, prescription drug assistance and Social Security.

Nutrition Services

Nutritious home delivered meals (known as "Meals on Wheels") are provided to older persons who are homebound. Congregate Meals provide the opportunity for older persons to enjoy a meal and socialize with other seniors in the community.

Home Chore Services

These services include housekeeping, shopping and home maintenance.

Home Health Services

Includes such activities as changing wound dressings, checking vital signs, cleaning catheters and providing tube feedings.

Legal Assistance

Advice and representation is available to persons aged 60+ for certain legal matters including government program benefits, tenant rights, and consumer problems.

Personal Care

Services assist functionally-impaired individuals with bathing, dressing, walking, supervision, emotional security, and eating.

Respite Care

Offers caregivers a break from constant supervision and personal care of a person with a functional impairment.

Senior Housing Options

The variety of options available include: assisted living, retirement communities, nursing facilities, government assisted housing, and shared housing.

Senior Center Programs

Offers a variety of recreational and educational programs, seminars, events and activities for older adults.

Telephone Reassurance

Trained volunteers provide regular contact and safety check to reassure and support homebound senior citizens and disabled persons.

Transportation

Services are available for older or disabled individuals who do not have private transportation, or who are unable to utilize public transportation to meet their needs.

Volunteer Services

Volunteers provide daily telephone reassurance, friendly visiting and insurance counseling to older adults.