



Policy Brief

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## “YOU JUST FORGE AHEAD”: THE CONTINUING CHALLENGES OF DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE IN LONG-TERM CARE

**Keywords:** disaster preparedness, long-term care, assisted living, nursing home

**Purpose of the Study:** To identify the factors that long-term care (LTC) leadership considered when preparing for, and responding to, Hurricane Irma in Florida.

### Key Findings:

- ✓ Preparations varied among the LTC communities, though some subthemes emerged
- ✓ Leadership identified several challenges to resident safety and stability
- ✓ Many residents and staff were anxious after the hurricane, and leadership proposed organizational and community-level changes

**Major Policy/Practice Implication:** Adequate disaster preparation for LTC communities requires collaboration among multiple entities, including community responders and policymakers.

### IMPORTANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Research indicates that nursing home (NH) residents exposed to hurricanes are at increased risk of hospitalization and death, particularly after evacuation, and assisted living (AL) residents are more likely to utilize emergency departments after hurricanes. Long-term care (LTC) leaders (NH and AL leaders) also struggle to ensure resident safety during disasters due to challenges with staff, supplies, power, and evacuation. Even more, LTC communities may not be included in community disaster planning because they are not considered healthcare facilities, which leaves them with minimal community support and limited access to resources during disasters.

### STUDY METHODS

Researchers conducted interviews and focus groups from 2018 to 2020 with 89 administrative staff representing 100 LTC communities in Florida (30 NHs & 70 AL communities). They recruited participants at state-wide events, and used a maximum variation method of sampling in which they selected staff from LTC communities with diverse characteristics such as size, evacuation status, and region within Florida. Data were audio recorded, professionally transcribed, and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Researchers identified themes and subthemes guided by the social ecological model (SEM), used abductive reasoning to limit bias, and had an advisory board review themes for appropriateness.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ✓ **Preparations varied among the communities, though some subthemes emerged:** Most participants mentioned the importance of collaborative relationships, evacuation decisions, staffing, supplies, and communication plans. Preparations seemed to vary among different types and sizes of communities. For example, more NH leaders mentioned collaborative relationships with local emergency personnel and healthcare coalitions than AL leaders, and communities within corporate chains mentioned support of the larger corporation. Similarly, small AL communities seemed to have the least formalized staffing plans, and less access to needed supplies.
- ✓ **Participants identified several challenges to resident safety and stability:** Major challenges included mobilizing resources, particularly staff, accommodating nonresidents, such as staff family and pets, communicating with residents' families when phone towers and powerlines were down, dealing with unexpected crises, such as extended power loss, and returning to normalcy.
- ✓ **Residents and staff were anxious after the hurricane, and leadership proposed change:** Dementia residents had increased psychiatric episodes after the hurricane, particularly residents who were evacuated into difficult environments, such as shelters with mats on the floor. Staff were exhausted and mentally drained for extended periods of time after the hurricane. Participants proposed organizational changes, including better staffing plans, as well as community-level changes, including more efficient state processes for approving generators and designating local evacuation spaces appropriate for LTC residents.

## PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Findings suggest a need for stronger collaboration among the multiple environments around LTC communities, as demonstrated in the adapted disaster preparedness SEM below.

**For policy makers:** Create more avenues of support for LTC at the community-level. For example, establish better links between local emergency managers and LTC communities and prioritize power restoration for LTC, especially AL communities.

**For service providers:** Prepare staff for disasters as much as possible. Provide needed support during and after the event (e.g., breaks, overtime pay, strong leadership, etc.)

**For researchers:** More research is needed to better understand the specific barriers to developing collaborative relationships between LTC communities and local emergency services/healthcare coalitions.

*[See the disaster preparedness SEM on the next page]*

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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## DISASTER PREPAREDNESS SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL

