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Protecting the Most Vulnerable

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Joshua G. Behr: Protecting the most vulnerable

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Joshua Behr, ODU

AS WE WATCH the weather with some trepidation, we picture in the mind's eye what the storm may have in store for us, both as a community and as a household. If the current storms turn away from us, as current models suggest, it is only a matter of time before Hampton Roads is targeted again.

While the region has suffered the brunt of many storms, most recently Isabel and Irene, we have not experienced a punishing blow within the living memory of most residents.

We have grown as a region in the way we prepare for these potentially catastrophic events. We have some of the best emergency managers, first responders and medical and public safety personnel living, working and training in Hampton Roads.

Our community is more "storm literate," perceiving the potential risk from these adverse events. Lines of authority and communication among localities, the state and federal agencies are markedly better. And, not the least, we as a nation have an exceptional capacity for nongovernmental organizations to feed, house and care for both responders and displaced families.

While these efforts are reassuring and suggest we are becoming more resilient, the awesome energy of nature and the potential havoc it may wreak cannot be discounted. Despite overall progress in preparation and awareness, many of our fellow citizens remain particularly vulnerable. While it is true that storms are indiscriminate, it is also true that a forceful storm will disproportionately harm some communities and groups.

We know from experience that people with limited social and financial networks, cognitive disabilities, physical mobility issues, diminished sensory perceptions such as sight and hearing, mental health challenges and multiple chronic conditions are less able to prepare for, weather, and recover from severe events.

As a storm approaches, continue to think about your household and what steps you may take to mitigate the damage. But be aware of neighbors who are especially vulnerable and check to see if you can contribute in some fashion to decreasing their risk, either in preparing for the storm or in the immediate aftermath. Here are some hurdles medically fragile and vulnerable members of our community face:

- Getting out of harm's way is one of the best ways to reduce a storm's risk. However, for some elderly citizens, the logistics of identifying an exit destination and managing transportation may be daunting. Traveling to an unfamiliar destination may be so uncomfortable it may contribute to the propensity to shelter in place.
- Disruption in residential electrical service can pose serious health implications for medically fragile populations. Some residents are particularly heat-sensitive and will remain indoors following an event. Others may require electricity to run medical equipment.
- In anticipation of the storm, emergency managers, public officials and forecasters will use colorful visuals and specialized language to communicate the risk posed by the storm. Those with sensory disabilities may not be able to fully assess the risk.
- Assuring continuity in medical regimen is essential to managing chronic conditions and mental health. A disruptive event, even if not catastrophic, may limit access to medication, appointments and may make accessing primary and specialty care more challenging. Limited social network and transportation options may exacerbate these issues.
- Following a severe weather event, the immediate surroundings of a home may be littered with debris. For neighbors with mobility issues or diminished sight, the rubbish strewn about may lead to danger.

While we think ahead about how to mitigate the risk to ourselves and our families, I encourage all of us to think also about our neighbors who may be medically fragile or particularly vulnerable. A strong sense of community and compassion for our neighbors contributes to Hampton Roads' resilience.

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http://pilotonline.com/opinion/columnist/guest/joshua-g-behr-protecting-the-most-vulnerable/article_eb52e97b-02b9-5b55-b316-98875fc10ee4.html