American Academy of Nursing and American Red Cross Issue Recommendations on Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery for Older Adults

Experts Release an Evidence-Based Report Intended to Close the Disaster Prep Gap Among Older Adults

April 9, 2020 (Washington, DC)—The American Academy of Nursing (Academy) and the American Red Cross collaborated on a white paper titled "Closing the Gaps: Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery for Older Adults." The report, based on review of the latest evidence and legislation on the topic, was produced by members of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council and the Academy Policy Expert Round Table on Emergency/Disaster Preparedness for Older Adults.

The study found that while disaster preparedness is vital for people of all ages, older adults are more vulnerable and experience more casualties after a natural disaster or emergency due to several factors, including:

- Older adults have a greater prevalence of chronic conditions, multi-morbidity, cognitive impairment and medication concerns during disasters.
- Older adults have a greater dependence on assistive devices (i.e. walkers, glasses) supplies and support requirements (from caregivers and others) during disasters.
- Greater issues of social isolation make older persons more vulnerable.
- Mixed findings exist around the vulnerability for older adults to psychological distress compared to younger adults.
- Gaps in preparedness of caregivers of older persons, especially of those with dementia.

During both Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, approximately half of all deaths related to the storms were seniors. "Disaster preparedness is especially important among this vulnerable population," said Academy President Eileen Sullivan-Marx, PhD, RN, FAAN. "We, as nurses, are on the front lines of responding to disasters and have to operate under volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (commonly known as VUCA) circumstances. Working with older adults to create their own preparedness plans will make it easier for health professionals to respond and mobilize during crisis."

These recommendations are also useful and pertinent when emergencies necessitate shelter-in-place policies, such as the directives a majority of states have enacted in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Similar to a natural disaster, the pandemic is disproportionately impacting older adults and the Academy continues to call on policymakers to protect vulnerable populations. To help address preparedness gaps, the report includes 25 evidence-informed expert recommendations, including:

- Older adults and their unpaid caregiver(s) should be provided with tailored, easy-to-access information related to emergency/disaster preparedness and guidance on how to develop customized emergency plans. Access to these programs should be increased.
- Older adults who are reliant on mobility aids should remove or minimize barriers affecting their ability to evacuate and should take steps to ensure their safety within their surroundings.
- Programs that provide essential community services and assistance with daily living activities for older people (financial, medical, personal care, food, and transportation) should develop plans

and protocols related to responding adequately to the needs of their clients during emergencies and disasters.
- Local governments should leverage data sources, such as registries, that identify at-risk individuals to enable emergency responders to more easily prioritize their search and rescue efforts following a disaster or emergency.
- Healthcare professionals and emergency response personnel should receive training on providing geriatric care relevant to their discipline and how best to assist older adults and their unpaid caregivers during disasters.

To learn more, view the report here.

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Acknowledgements
The co-chairs of this research project were **Samir K. Sinha,** MD, DPhil, FRCPC, AGSF (member of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council; Director of Geriatrics at Sinai Health System and University Health Network, Toronto, Ontario; Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine; Associate Professor in the Departments of Medicine, Family and Community Medicine and the Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation at the University of Toronto, Ontario) and **Wanda Raby Spurlock**, DNS, RN-BC, CNE, FNGNA, ANEF, FAAN (member of the American Academy of Nursing's Aging Expert Panel and Emergency/Disaster Preparedness Sub-Committee; Professor at the College of Nursing and Allied Health, Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana). **Nicoda Foster,** MPH, PhD(c) (member of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council; Office of the Director of Geriatrics at Sinai Health System and the University Health Network Toronto, Ontario) served as project manager.

About the American Red Cross
The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and provides emotional support to victims of disasters; supplies about 40 percent of the nation's blood; teaches skills that save lives; provides international humanitarian aid; and supports military members and their families. The Red Cross is a not-for-profit organization that depends on volunteers and the generosity of the American public to perform its mission. For more information, please visit redcross.org or cruzrojaamericana.org, or visit us on Twitter at @RedCross.

About the American Academy of Nursing
The American Academy of Nursing (Academy) serves the public by advancing health policy through the generation, synthesis, and dissemination of nursing knowledge. Academy Fellows are inducted into the organization for their extraordinary contributions to improve health locally and globally. With more than 2,800 Fellows, the Academy represents nursing's most accomplished leaders in policy, research, administration, practice, and academia.

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