



# DISASTER PREPAREDNESS: *People with Autism*

## DEFINITION:

**AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASDs)** are developmental disorders that limit a person's social interaction and communication. Individuals with ASDs also have a restricted range of interests and often have difficulty learning how to perform everyday activities. Autism, Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS) fall under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders and are commonly referred to as "autism spectrum disorders." This term conveys the continuum of ability levels, but is not itself an official diagnosis. Onset is typically before age three, but ASD can be recognized and diagnosed in older children and adults.

## LINKS:

[http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail\\_autism.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm)

<http://www.autismnj.org/>

<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/how-we-can-help/safe-and-sound/>

<http://www.autismspeaks.org/news/news-item/hurricane-isaac-disaster-preparedness-tips-and-resources>

On-line 1st responder development disabilities training:

[https://njlmn.rutgers.edu/jsp/cat/crs\\_info.jsp?crs=14812](https://njlmn.rutgers.edu/jsp/cat/crs_info.jsp?crs=14812)

and [www.njlearn.com](http://www.njlearn.com)

## ABOUT NJGAINED:

The NJ Group for Access and Integration Needs in Emergencies and Disasters (NJ GAINED) acts as an advisory board to the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM) and the NJ Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (OHSP) regarding issues affecting people with access and functional needs (AFN) in New Jersey before, during and after an emergency or disaster. Read more at: <http://www.state.nj.us/njoem/plan/special-needs-njsnap.html>

## FOR OEM/FIRST RESPONDERS:

- **Conduct** outreach and education with the autism community interface with service providers/advocacy groups as part of preparedness planning.
- **Plan** for a quiet area in shelters for respite from noise and overstimulation
- Offer an area to recharge assistive/adaptive technology
- Do not separate a person from assistive devices or caregivers — individuals may carry a list/file or life/medical alert tag about what helps them cope and remain independent.
- Use multiple communication strategies to relay emergency information
- Use signage with pictures in shelters. This will help the whole community know what is expected in specific areas.
- Associated features of ASD: acts as though deaf; high or low activity level; little or no apparent fear of dangers; unusual responses to sensations, including a high tolerance for pain; eating, sleeping and toileting difficulties; seizure disorder; aggressive or self-injurious behavior; savant abilities (*present in less than 2% of individuals diagnosed with autism*)
- Individuals with autism may present elopement and other safety risks — first responders should ask and take measures to secure the environment, when possible.



## FOR SERVICE PROVIDERS/COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATIONS:

- **Collaborate** on preparedness efforts with your local Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and first responders (Police, Fire, EMS)
- **Educate** consumers and their support network/family on disaster preparedness. Engage the consumer in the process.
- Public shelters might be noisy and chaotic — discuss alternatives to public shelter (evacuate to a family member's house, friend's house, hotel/motel)
- Create "go-bags" with consumer
- Assist in creating a checklist/sheet on tips for communication, and listing emergency contacts (*also medical alert ID, etc.*)
- Have a plan for staffing the agency during disasters (*continuity of operations*) and ensure all staff are aware of expectations.
- If consumers with autism present elopement and other safety risks, remind families that disasters are characterized by an insecure environment and that they should take this into account when developing disaster plans.



## FOR CONSUMERS AND FAMILIES/CAREGIVERS:

- **Create** a disaster plan/kit, and include a list of what makes communication easier for you, and small items that help you communicate and feel comforted. Include ear plugs or ear muffs if noise is uncomfortable for you.
- **Consider** behavior plan implementation needs.
- Families should consider disclosing to first responders or mass care staff when their son/daughter poses an elopement or other safety risk.
- Plan what to do in an emergency with your family, your caseworker, or others that help you
- Expect emergencies to cause changes — sometimes you may need to go to a family member or friend's house or a shelter until it's safe to return home.
- Learn about emergency preparedness online at [www.ready.nj.gov](http://www.ready.nj.gov)