# Research Brief:

## Business Continuity for Human Service Providers

Most resources designed to help individuals with disabilities to prepare for emergency situations emphasize the need to develop personal emergency plans. An important element of such plans is the establishment of a support network. Many people with disabilities receive various kinds of support from human service providers in their communities. If these organizations are not adequately prepared for possible disaster situations, they will be unable to provide support during a disaster situation.

## What is Business Continuity?

Jrad, Morawski, and Spergel (2004) noted that recent catastrophic events have resulted in an increased awareness among businesses and government agencies of the need to continue their operations and provide critical services after a disaster strikes. While the need for disaster recovery has always existed, the authors pointed out that the emphasis is shifting from reactive (recovery) to proactive (preparedness) to minimize damage from disasters and limit disaster impact through proper planning. This proactive planning focuses on how to continue business operations in times of disaster.

Business continuity (also known as continuity of operations or COOP) is planning for a disaster/emergency event by ensuring continuous operation of the organization related to essential day-to-day functions. It is not an emergency plan; emergency plans are designed to ensure the safety of personnel. A business continuity plan should be a part of every agency's fundamental mission. Today's changing threat environment has increased the need for continuity capabilities for all types of businesses, especially for those in the business of serving people.

## Why is Business Continuity Important for Human Service Organizations?

Business Continuity is different for human service organizations as compared to other businesses because their product or inventory is people. Because these organizations are in the business of

helping meet the basic needs (such as food, clothing, and Shelter) of their clients and consumers, the continuation of services is essential. Despite their vital role in the lives of people with disabilities, many human service organizations are not prepared for the possibility of an event that could threaten their ability to provide these critical services. Organizations that serve persons with disabilities need to be particularly mindful of this, as the people they serve may have few alternative resources for needed assistance.

## What are the Roles of Independent Living Centers and Other Human Service Providers in Meeting the Needs of Persons with Disabilities During Disaster Situations?

Larson and King (2007) emphasized the key roles of direct service professionals (DSP's) in the lives of people with disabilities. These providers are critical to the support networks of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, providers play a critical role in communicating to and coordinating with first responders for the disability community. In a very real way, human service organizations can literally make the difference between life and death for persons with disabilities.

Through promotion of choice, self-direction and inclusion, Independent Living Centers (ILC's) and other organizations that serve members of the disability community work with people with disabilities to ensure that they have the same freedoms and civil liberties as all other citizens.  ILC's and other service providers may play an important role in keeping people with disabilities safe during disaster situations. For example, they can educate consumers and family members about the need for individual safety plans. They may also train first responders about the needs of the disability community and how to interact with people with a variety of disabilities. Further, some ILC's have equipped themselves to serve as a resource to other service providers and businesses that want to develop business continuity plans that consider the needs of individuals with disabilities.

## Best Practices for Continuing Services in Times of Disaster

The Progressive Center for Independent Living (PCIL) in New Jersey, The Center for Independent Living (CIL) in the Florida Keys, and United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of New York, are just a few of the organizations that have had to find ways to continue serving persons with disabilities during times of crisis. Service providers like these that have managed to effectively serve people in times of crisis have been able to do so because staff members were committed and willing to stay until the job was done. These organizations thoughtfully utilized available staff and other resources. Additionally, their knowledge of other resources such as public transportation systems was important in their being able to ensure that consumers made it home safely during disastrous situations. Further, these organizations realized that in order to help others, their employees must have personal plans in place; in other words, employees needed to know how they would keep themselves safe before they could effectively continue to assist consumers.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has put forth a number of suggestions for business continuity in times of anticipated and unanticipated crisis. Detailed in FEMA's 2009 publication, Continuity Guidance for Non-federal Entities, these suggestions are useful for all types of businesses, including those serving people with disabilities. FEMA suggests that businesses:
- Determine essential business functions and develop plans that will enable functions across a broad spectrum of hazards and crises be they natural, manmade, technological, or national security emergencies
- Engage in regularly scheduled tests, training, and exercises to ensure the business continuity plan is viable, before disaster strikes
- Protect essential assets: personnel, records, equipment, physical setting
- Create a succession plan for the continuation of leadership in times of crisis

Once these objectives have been met, the Nonprofit Risk Management Center (2010) encourages organizations to take steps to ensure that business continuity remains a priority. They refer to this as "inspiring a continuity culture." This can be accomplished through addressing business continuity as part of new employee orientation, having periodic simulated business interruption events, and periodically reviewing, evaluating and revising the business continuity plan.

## Conclusion

With increased disasters and environmental change, all businesses need to be better prepared. No matter what the situation, working smarter makes life easier. This is especially true for organizations that provide services to individuals with disabilities. When crisis makes doing business more difficult, the need to stay in business intensifies and the stakes are higher. Consequently, organizations serving persons with disabilities need to consider how to remain available to their customers in times of disaster. There is a clear need for more information on the role of human service providers who work with at-risk populations, such as persons with disabilities. These individuals are already operating under considerable stress, often challenged by day- to- day issues. Service providers who have a business continuity plan in place and effectively work in partnership with their clients and consumers will be in the best position to continue to meet critical needs in the event of any kind of emergency situation.

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