In the days and weeks following the devastation wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, state developmental disabilities agencies across the country stepped forward with offers to provide staffing, housing, funding, and other direct assistance to the Gulf Coast states. The National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services (NASDDDS) received countless calls and e-mails from members with offers of assistance. A special membership teleconference was hurriedly convened to inform the state agency officials of the actions they could take to assist their sister agencies. During this call, state leaders learned of the extreme challenges facing the affected states, and began to identify critical emergency preparedness lessons that could be learned by all state disability agencies from the tragic aftermath of these storms.

In the weeks that followed NASDDDS began compiling existing state and national emergency preparedness materials, recommendations, and best practice examples to assist member state agency officials as they assessed their emergency response plans and capabilities. While a great deal of resource material was available, it soon became clear that most of the information on preparedness was of limited applicability to the needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities and, as a result, of little use to state developmental disability agency officials. In response, the NASDDDS board of directors launched an initiative to develop new tools to assist member agency officials to design and build state-specific emergency preparedness plans that address the unique characteristics and needs of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The outcome of that work is the Web-based NASDDDS Emergency Response Preparedness Self-Assessment Instrument (http://rtc.umn.edu/erp/main).

The NASDDDS Emergency Response Preparedness Self-Assessment Instrument is a flexible self-assessment tool for state officials to use to determine the extent to which their agency’s current emergency preparedness plans address issues that are critical to the support and protection of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities during periods of disaster or crisis. The instrument was developed by a partnership between NASDDDS and the Research and Training Center on Community Living at the University of Minnesota, under the guidance of an ad hoc advisory committee composed of nine state developmental disability agency directors and other officials with extensive emergency planning experience. The instrument has been designed with the following characteristics as central features: (a) it is easy to use and applicable to the range of programs and services furnished by state
developmental disabilities agencies; (b) it fits within the broader context of emergency preparedness plans developed by state and federal emergency management agencies, statewide mutual aid compacts, and national and local authorities; and (c) it fully addresses the challenges associated with protecting disaster victims and potential victims with intellectual and developmental disabilities who live and work in a wide range of community settings and situations.

The organization of the instrument reflects the need for it to be used by states that have a variety of disaster preparedness planning approaches. Some states, for example, first organize their planning according to management activities, such as preparing, responding and recovering. Others plan around operational levels that describe the responsibilities of individuals, service providers, and government entities. And other states structure their emergency response planning around specific content areas such as collaboration, communication, and transportation. The instrument therefore is structured according the following categories, allowing users to directly access the assessment format that best meets their needs:

- Management Activities: Preparing, responding, recovering.
- Operational Levels: Individual, service provider, local/municipal authorities, county/regional authorities, state agencies, national emergency agencies and entities.
- Content Areas: Collaboration with state emergency management agency activities; stakeholder involvement; communication and coordination; workforce (duties, roles, responsibilities, availability, training needs); power generation (heat, light, air conditioning, refrigeration); transportation (before, during, after); identification and tracking of clients and staff members; evacuation; specialized supports for individuals with developmental disabilities; and shelter.

In contrast to text-based materials that provide a single format for all users, the NASDDDS instrument is a Web-based tool that can be easily adapted to the specific organizational format of a state’s emergency preparedness plans. All survey items are placed in a searchable database that permits users to rearrange the format to best meet their needs. Structuring the self-assessment in this way offers a simple and straightforward approach that makes it easier to access the information both across and within categories. Rather than having to page through the entire document one section at a time, a user can “click” on a level – “preparing” for example – and be able to access all items pertaining to “preparing” across all operational levels and content areas. Users can follow the questions from one category to another or navigate to a different section altogether. Links to relevant resource materials are embedded within each question so that users have immediate access to extensive references and additional information.

Users begin working with the tool by selecting one of the three initial organizing patterns (i.e., Operational Levels, Management Activities, or Content Areas). They next identify the specific areas to be reviewed within those categories. Then, the program generates a series of questions regarding the extent to which the various emergency response plans address a particular issue. Users are asked to
indicate whether the topic being described is (a) adequately addressed by their state’s emergency planning documents, (b) addressed but needs improvement, (c) is not addressed, or (d) the user does not know. Users are then able to select one of the following for each question: “Flag this item for future action,” “comment about my state’s readiness to address this issue,” “view supporting resources for this evaluation statement,” or “make comments.” The program keeps track of the answers provided in the self-assessment and provides a summary for each specific area as well as an overall summary report.

The instrument has been field-tested in six states and will be available for access online by all states in early September 2007. Although developed for the use of state developmental disability agency officials, the instrument’s broad scope, comprehensiveness, and ease of use has earned it high praise from others involved in the field-testing process, including provider agency officials and other stakeholders. State agencies, community service providers, and others interested in exploring its usefulness for evaluating their emergency preparedness plans in relation to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities can find more information, as well as a demonstration version of the instrument, at http://rtc.umn.edu/erp/main.

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