

CARING FOR OUR MOST VULNERABLE CITIZENS

Residents with special needs, the elderly, the homeless and those without transportation require extra attention in order to stay protected in weather emergencies.

Though Pinellas County government has education programs in place to help these citizens prepare and find safe shelter, the responsibility for storm preparation rests with individuals and their families or caregivers. That planning needs

to happen early. **DO NOT WAIT UNTIL THE STORM IS RAGING.** Emergency personnel may not be able to respond when high winds make road travel hazardous. Plan for safe shelter now.

Even if you don't have special needs, you can help others who do. Look around your neighborhood, workplace or place of worship and reach out to offer a hand. Serve as a host home, help to answer questions or pick up a few extra survival kit items for someone else.



Residents With Special Needs Should Register

Residents with certain medical conditions can get help during an evacuation. Three special needs shelters will open for those requiring MINIMAL medical assistance.

INFORMATION YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Register now. Contact either Pinellas County Emergency Management, your local fire department or your home healthcare provider.
- Once registered, you will be contacted for more information. After a medical needs review, your eligibility will be assessed. If you don't qualify for a special needs shelter, other options will be discussed with you. If you are registered and need transportation to a shelter, your local fire department will contact you before an evacuation.
- If you have your own transportation to a special needs shelter, preregistration is not required, but it is strongly recommended.
- You may bring your caregiver and/or family with you to a special needs shelter.
- You are not obligated to go to a special needs shelter once registered, if you have made other safe and secure arrangements.
- Service animals may go with you, but other pets need to be cared for by making prior arrangements. If you are registered and eligible to go to a special needs shelter, call Pinellas County Animal Services at (727) 582-2600 to register your pet. Animal Services will make arrangements for your pet to be taken to a host home.

Register Now

To register for a special needs shelter and/or transportation, do one of the following:

- Submit a form online at www.pinellascounty.org/emergency.
- Call Pinellas County Emergency Management at (727) 464-3800.
- Call your nearest fire department or home healthcare provider.

Are you a caregiver? Two recent surveys of Florida residents report that of those who are caregivers for an elderly or disabled relative, 31 to 39 percent do not know how to get help for their family members with special needs.

What to Expect From a Special Needs Shelter

The Pinellas County Health Department and School Board staff these shelters with nurses and other medical personnel. Oxygen is available, but air conditioning may not be available if power is interrupted.

Before going to a shelter, arrange to bring at least a two-week supply of any medications you need along with any needed portable equipment. If you have special diet requirements, be sure to pack your own special nonperishable snacks. For your own comfort, bring items such as bedding, sheets, pillows and blankets. Cots are available on a limited basis and are not guaranteed.

Special needs shelters do not have hospital beds and cannot assist those with acute medical problems.

Advice For All Residents With Special Needs

Whether you go to a special needs shelter or not, here's some good advice to keep in mind when preparing for hurricane season:

- Start a personal support network of people you can count on during an emergency.
- Create an emergency health information card that is customized to you.
- Complete an emergency contact list with names and phone numbers of family members, friends, doctors, insurance information and hospital preferences.
- Conduct an ability self-assessment. Know what you can and cannot do. Talk with your health care provider about a realistic plan.
- Maintain at least a two-week supply and a current list of medications.
- Keep important equipment and assistive devices in a consistent, convenient and secured place.

Your Doctor Can Help

Assistance at a special needs shelter is limited to basic medical monitoring and backup electricity for lighting. The shelter will be inside a school and will likely be crowded and noisy. Cots may not be available for everyone. While this is a safe location to ride out a storm, it is not for everyone. Many citizens require more comfortable accommodations as mobility restrictions make it impossible to sleep on the floor or a cot. In these cases, the host homes program is an excellent alternative. (See story on page 10)

For some, a stay in a nursing home or hospital is necessary. If your condition warrants this level of care, then your physician can make arrangements ahead of time. A pre-admission letter needs to be written by the physician and accepted in advance by the facility of choice. At the time of evacuation, emergency workers must see a copy of this letter in order to transport you to that facility. The facility must also see this letter. Another reason you need to pre-arrange your stay is that Medicare will only pay for visits that are medically necessary. If any costs arise from your stay, you may be responsible to pay for them out of pocket.

Special Needs Shelters

Dunedin Highland Middle School
70 Patricia Ave.
Dunedin

Oak Grove Middle School
1370 S. Belcher Rd.
Clearwater

John Hopkins Middle School
701 16th St. S.
St. Petersburg

Did You Know...

- Florida law requires that utility companies offer a "priority reconnection service" for people with disabilities who use power-dependent equipment. Contact your utility company to get placed on the list.
- Service animals are allowed in hotels, motels and public shelters. Don't forget to pack their supplies, too.
- Wheelchair users need to have more than one exit from their residence that is wheelchair accessible. Practice how to escape from your home.
- Wear medical alert tags. Also write down special instructions for emergency personnel in a brief and direct format, such as, "I am deaf, please write down your instructions" or "Please take my medication from the refrigerator."
- The National Weather Service has information on its website to help the hearing impaired utilize NOAA Weather Alert Radios for emergency weather notifications. Go to www.nws.noaa.gov/nwr/special_need.htm.
- Keep cash available in case you need to buy special supplies.
- Be an advocate for yourself! Practice how to quickly explain your condition and your adaptive equipment to someone who is helping you.