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CONSUMER HEALTH

Caregiving: Lesson from Buffalo -- 7

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BUFFALO, NY, United States (UPI) -- Shortly after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, I asked a government official how best to prepare for more possible incidents. I was told: 'You`re on your own,' known as the 'yo-yo' response.

In a natural disaster, too, you`re on your own.

To be frank, caregivers are not given a whole lot of attention by anyone under normal conditions, but during a disaster the focus is definitely on critical infrastructure like roads. So caregivers usually are left to figure things out on their own.

A little more than a month ago an unusually early snowstorm dumped almost 2 feet of snow on the Buffalo area, downing trees that still held green leaves on power lines. That left 380,000 homes and about 1 million people without power, most for a week and some as long as 10 days. Many didn`t have landline telephones for up to a month.

The fallen tree limbs made driving difficult at best and illegal at worst.

In addition to food defrosting in the refrigerator and a 'boil water' directive, many people had a basement filling with water because sump pumps could not work without electricity.

For those young and strong, waiting outside a Sears or a Home Depot for several hours to buy a generator was not out of the question, but it was for the elderly or physically challenged.

So how did people manage? For the most part, they made it through on their own. The Buffalo chapter of the American Red Cross opened a handful of shelters, but it took almost a week before they were functioning.

Local governments tried to bridge the gap and opened public buildings like a senior center to provide refuge for those who could not stand the cold. But town governments are not usually equipped to become shelters. Many people had to depend on the Red Cross for cots and bedding, and some did not get it.

The local fire departments did yeoman`s work putting together shelter and food for those driven from their homes.

With nowhere else to go, people gravitated to the fire stations, and the firefighters made it work -- even if they were not prepared to care for people for as long as several days. If they didn`t have a generator they went and got a generator. They made food, even if it was chili for three days in row -- and gave it to the heart patients. Games were played with children. The elderly were cared for.

But arrangements for someone physically frail, in a wheelchair or with Alzheimer`s disease? There wasn`t much help for them.

A natural disaster, a terrorist attack or a pandemic is exactly what a caregiver does not need. Of course, no one does, but a caregiver is stretched to the max, and transferring a frail person to a shelter can be a daunting task. Caring for someone frail in a shelter can be even more daunting.

It`s a shame the national media did not pick up on Buffalo`s snowstorm/power outage predicament, because there is a lesson for all here: We are not a society that can live without power for any period of time.

Despite the snowstorms that hit Western New York in the past 30 years, 'there is not much appreciation by federal agencies that snow events can be very serious emergencies,' according to Ernest Sternberg, a professor of urban and regional planning at the University at Buffalo.

'We do not appreciate that our dependence on electrical grids for heating and keeping our homes dry has made us more vulnerable than we were in the past,' said Sternberg.

If there are lessons to be learned, we are not learning them. Buffalo was hit by a spring ice storm in 1976 that left many without power for about a week. Thirty years later, many residents and local governments were no better prepared.

Can we not invent some gizmo -- not a generator -- that can keep a natural-gas furnace and a refrigerator going during a power outage? I was a pretty good student, but I am too stupid to deal with a generator. How often do you refill them? How do you keep the fuel from spilling? How do you keep the electricity from backing into the grid and causing injury to those working on the line?

Can we come up with something that makes a lengthy power outage less dangerous? Can we do something about having the power restored quicker than 10 days?

Buffalo can deal with snow, but it cannot deal with a long power outage, and neither can any other metropolitan area.

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