

Finding Resilience in the Face of Catastrophic Disaster Scenarios

By S.E. Well - September 2024

Living in California, we have always had one thing to worry about- Earthquakes. That sudden jolt! Bringing hidden perspectives to the surface, cracking faults, shattering homes and ruining lives in the process. Major earthquakes seem to be increasing in severity and frequency around the planet, even occurring in unlikely locations like the April 2024, 4.8 M earthquake in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey.

What has become abundantly clear is that there are many new and different types of natural and man-made disasters looming on the horizon. Whether it is intense rain storms, causing major flooding and landslides, manmade or lightning strike wildfires that level entire towns and villages, the need for developing effective strategies to manage the intensity and scope of emerging disaster scenarios is a daunting proposition.

These same issues are magnified when considering disaster coping preparation or planning for anyone with a physical, mental health or functional needs disability. The need for regularly scheduled, inclusive disaster preparedness for those in the disabled community has never been greater. One such organization working to bridge this gap is located in Berkeley, CA, called The Center for Independent Living also known as, "The CIL" On a whim I clicked on a link to a volunteer and training opportunity sponsored by CIL, Berkeley. I was offered the chance to participate in training specifically for the disabled to manage and cope with major disasters. Neither did I imagine the opportunities that this type of training would bring nor the sense of inclusion that the training would eventually foster among local disabled residents.

Known as The Emergency Preparedness Peer Ambassador Training, I could tell it was different right from the start. Focusing on several key

areas of preparation, planning and post event survival, the program also works to educate the disabled community members on the 'in's and out's' of who, what, where and why of disaster resiliency preparation and survival. Including the disabled community as a part of the solution, creating links between the Office of Emergency Services, and other government agencies and the community is a major part of the training program. Opening doors to the information that many community members are not aware exist is also a component of the training sessions.

The six months spent training as a Peer Ambassador provided a new sense of confidence that I too can be resilient, and I am able to assist others in preparing for major disasters. With my training complete, I now help other community members prepare an emergency bag or, "Go Bag," with developing evacuation plans, creating family reunification contact methods and other essential post event survival strategies. The Emergency Preparedness Peer Ambassador and Disaster Resiliency Program has been incredibly valuable, and no doubt will continue to expand the training program as the need is ever present.

My time with the Peer Ambassadors has enriched my life by allowing me to participate, to help others and myself, feel more prepared to face major disasters. And as a result of my success with the program, I am now following up and participating as an intern for World Institute on Disabilities (a nonprofit, disability-led organization) and Global Alliance for Disaster Resource Acceleration specializing in expediting equipment, resources and logistics to disability-led organizations on the ground who are immediately affected by catastrophic man-made or natural disasters.