

## How Can Nursing Homes Better Keep the Elderly Safe?

Hurricane season is here. As much as we all hate the sound of those words, we must be diligent in our preparations in the event of a storm. As Floridians, many of us native to the state, we've all learned how to prepare our "just in case" supplies ahead of time and stash them away, hoping we won't need them. Floridians as a whole became complacent last year in the wake of Hurricane Irma, who struck our state with a vengeance, leaving most of South Florida without power for days or weeks. The state recovered, and life went back to normal, but there was still a sense of fear instilled in all of us.

For over a decade South Florida hadn't experienced a significant weather threat; Wilma was the last storm to wreak havoc on Floridians lives and property. With the chaotic 2017 hurricane season, we were reminded we must be accountable for our preparations, even if we don't need them.

While many of us have learned this lesson and are preparing accordingly, there are still many places in South Florida that are neglecting to do so. Places such as nursing facilities and assisted living communities have still not upgraded their backup generators to provide better care to some of the most vulnerable parts of our population: the elderly and the disabled. Florida has an extremely large population of senior citizens because of our (mostly!) beautiful weather. Senior citizens find rest and relaxation living out their golden years in sunny Florida. However, should they become ill and require more care than a family member can give them, a nursing facility is the safest place for them to be looked after.

Unfortunately, not every nursing facility is created equally, and some have failed to protect this vulnerable population from coming to serious harm (and even passing away) during natural disasters such as Hurricane Irma. To better inform senior citizens and their loved ones of what to look for when checking your elderly family member into a nursing home, Shaked Law Firm has compiled a go-to list of everything you need to know not only to keep your family member safe this summer, but year-round.

### The elderly have specific needs

When it comes to elder care, the needs of senior citizens differ from those of the general population. For example, while most of us drink when we're thirsty and can maintain our health on the recommended 8-glasses-per-day rule, the elderly have specific hydration needs that must be looked after. This need can be more or less, depending on health conditions that may be exacerbated by excess fluids or lack of fluids (dehydration). Aside from dehydration or excess fluid intake, the elderly have other needs that are not generally found in the younger population.

**Dietary considerations:** the elderly have specific dietary needs that must be met, preferably at the same time each day both to maintain or improve health and, to provide a sense of routine for those who have showed early signs of Alzheimer's or Dementia. These dietary needs are meant to improve brain function, bone health, liver, heart, and kidney function, as well as provide adequate vitamins such as C, B, D, and A. As we age, our dietary needs change with us. Nursing homes must do their due diligence to provide residents with meals that meet their specific needs.

**Physical activity and mental stimulation:** whether a senior citizen is wheelchair-bound or can still move around and enjoy a more active lifestyle, ensuring that the elderly have enough physical activity and mental stimulation is equally as important as the dietary and medical considerations that must be made. Providing for a senior's physical activity can mean working with a physical and occupational therapist, swimming with the assistance of a nurse or CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant), or engaging in activities such as card games, bingo or checkers to keep the mind active.

Some elderly people suffer depression and don't want to get out of bed in the morning, especially if they've been diagnosed with Alzheimer's or Dementia. It's important for family members and staff to engage the resident as much as possible to provide mental stimulation and bring joy to their life.

**Medical care:** senior citizens (and the disabled) have an entirely different set of medical needs than that of the average population. When it comes to the medical care of senior citizens, there is more to consider than those of us who live in our own homes and can visit a doctor on the off chance we catch a cold or sprain our ankle. When it comes to elder care, many people are unaware that health conditions can change overnight. Sudden Onset Pneumonia in the elderly can be deadly and medical attention is needed immediately.

**Several common ways to help prevent this illness include but are not limited to:**

- Keep resident rooms clean and free of dust, mold, mildew, and other common allergens that can trigger a bacterial infection.
- Maintain a comfortable temperature for the resident and throughout the facility; the elderly are more susceptible to cold weather and frigid air conditioning temperature, therefore it's necessary to check the thermostat and service it whenever necessary. Provide residents with blankets, sweaters, and hats during colder months (yes, even in Florida!) to prevent Sudden Onset Pneumonia.
- Don't ignore symptoms even if they may seem like "nothing serious". It's important to pay attention to coughs, sneezes, and other respiratory sounds that a resident may suddenly make because this could be a telltale sign that pneumonia may be about to set in.

## Necessary precautions can prevent an unnecessary loss of life

Now that we've offered a go-to guide for senior-specific needs, let's provide a look at exactly how caregivers in nursing homes can be more diligent in providing the care necessary to keep senior citizens safe and healthy. This information can be used year-round, even if some of the points made are specific to hurricane season.

**Backup generators:** backup power in the event of a hurricane is non-negotiable. In September of 2017, more than a dozen of Florida's senior citizens tragically passed away due to the lack of power in their nursing facility. While the facility claimed to provide hospital-level care, they did not follow through on their promises and many families lost loved ones prematurely due to the facility's negligence and outright carelessness. Nursing homes must have an adequate backup power supply for residents. Power can prevent residents from overheating and dehydrating. In certain situations, a power supply is necessary for ventilators, heart monitors, and other life-sustaining measures found in nursing homes.

**Clean, filtered water:** it's of utmost importance to provide senior citizens with clean, safe drinking water. While the younger population can drink tap water, our elderly family members must be more careful. This is because the elderly are more susceptible to bacterial infection and cannot fight off the illnesses they contract from drinking water that hasn't been properly filtered. Ensuring there is enough bottled water for every resident during a natural disaster is also a non-negotiable provision that must be made.

**Patience and compassion:** while these are not tangible items that can be provided to nursing home residents, they are no less important than clean drinking water and a backup power supply. In fact, being patient with the elderly is something many nurses lose sight of several years into their careers. They become tired or disillusioned after watching residents pass away and feel they can't get close to future residents. This is simply not true! The elderly who find themselves needing the care of a nursing facility are often scared and alone; some rarely receive visitors. This vulnerable part of the population looks to their caregivers for patience and compassion. Listen to a story a resident wants to tell, hold their hand, or read them a book before bed. All of these things do as much for the health of a senior citizen as medical care.

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