

Community Conversation: Older Adults - Resilient NJ

MEETING MINUTES

DATE: 6-17-21

SUBJECT: **Community Conversation Summary: Older Adults**
Resilient NJ - Atlantic County Coastal Communities (ACCR)

A meeting was held on June 17, 2021 at 2:00 PM with BERON Jewish Older Adults Services to discuss the Resilient NJ Project. The meeting was held via Zoom. The following were in attendance:

| Name | Organization | Email |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
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Part 1: Introductions and Welcome

- The facilitator and co-host introduced themselves. Participants gave brief introductions stating their first name and town of residence. Towns of residence included Margate, Linwood, Ventnor, and Ventnor Heights.
- The facilitators gave a short overview of Resilient NJ. The facilitator stressed the importance of public involvement in the planning process.
- The facilitator thanked Adrienne Epstein, Executive Director of the BERON Jewish Older Adults Services organization, for partnering with Resilient NJ to hold the community conversation and recruit participants.

Part 2: Past Disasters and Related Challenges

Participants discussed past disasters, the challenges they experienced as older adults, and how they were able to address or cope with these challenges. Participants noted the following experiences:

- **Power outages:** Most of the participants had experienced power outages during a disaster.

- Power outages are happening more often and often last for more than two days.
- Not everyone can afford a generator. Being without electricity for more than two days becomes very challenging.
- Power outages are challenging for people who live in areas that are often the last to have power restored.
- One participant sits in their car for air conditioning during summer storm power outages.
- One clinic lost electricity and refrigeration for flu vaccines, medications, and food. Atlantic Electric kept them updated on electricity status.
- Coastal residents went without electricity for five days and were not allowed back to their neighborhoods.
- **Evacuating with pets:** Residents need to better understand how to prepare for an emergency with a pet. Pet owners need to have their pet's medical records, pet food, and find accommodation.
 - One participant could not find a hotel that would accept their two large dogs.
 - Pet owners need to have records and vaccine documentation handy, which is not always easy in an emergency.
- **Keeping track of important documents:** Residents discussed the need to have documents and information easily available when evacuating. One participant was told to write her social security number on her shoes.
- **Helping others:** Participants noted the importance of helping others during disasters. One participant hosted her in-laws for an extended time because their house had flooded.
- **Damages to homes:** Many participants experienced costly, extensive damages to their homes. Repairs took many months and required relocation. They had to throw out many belongings, including food. One participant suggested the need to save money for the cost of home repairs and staying in a hotel.
- **Experiences during Superstorm Sandy:**
 - Elderly residents were isolated and their children could not enter the city.
 - One participant stayed with family in Pennsylvania during the week of Superstorm Sandy and was not allowed to return home for some time.
 - One participant had to work and had difficulty driving through flooded roads to get to work in Atlantic City.
 - Other participants had to stay in hotels. One participant's wife was ill during one of the storms. This was very challenging and stressful.
 - Another participant was out of the country during Sandy, and had to remain in Europe for 4-5 days because of flight cancellations.
 - Participants were told they needed to raise their homes after Sandy. Flood insurance helped pay for this.
- **Experience with strong winds:**
 - A lot of trees were downed after a storm due to strong derecho winds
 - There was no weather forecast or warning of the derecho winds.
- **Older adults living in high-rise buildings:**

- Many residents live in tall buildings where evacuation is difficult if elevators do not work. Older adults in their 80s or 90s were particularly fearful about being able to evacuate. Many of these residents went to shelters during Sandy.
- **Access to home insurance:**
 - One participant evacuated to a hotel. However, the hotel management said they would have to leave in the morning before the storm
 - One participant's insurance policy did not cover temporary quarters in the event of a hurricane.
- **Suggestions for improvement:**
 - Plan for contactless delivery of meals to seniors.
 - Conduct wellness calls and checkup calls several times a week to seniors.
 - Improve access to telemedicine. Doctors started telemedicine appointments, but many seniors had no access to computers or Wi-Fi.
 - Ensure evacuation routes can move quickly without building up traffic.

Part 3: Community Assets

The facilitators led participants in a discussion about what community assets they feel are most important to protect from future disasters. Responses included:

- **Infrastructure:**
 - Bridges are important infrastructure because if they are flooded and closed, residents cannot leave their neighborhoods.
 - Getting off the island is an issue, which is why people evacuate before disaster events.
 - It is impossible to get into Ventnor Heights during flood conditions or bad weather. Participants often have to stay with friends because of lack of accessibility
- **Medical/healthcare needs:** Health related assets was mentioned several times. Health is a top priority for many.
 - Ensure prescription medication is available and avoid potential shortages.
 - Telehealth medical appointments
 - Hospitals
 - Recreation centers
 - During the COVID-19 pandemic, many seniors were fearful of going to the hospital when they were sick.
- **Pet care needs:**
 - Shelters should have food for pets.
 - Pet owners should be prepared to find a kennel for their pets in the event of an evacuation. Kennels can be expensive.
- **Banks/ATMs:** Residents should have cash on hand in case they are unable to access an ATM.

Part 4: Vision for the Future

Participants considered what they want their community to be in five or ten years and described their visions for a safer, more resilient future. They shared the following ideas:

- A community with access. Something has to be done to alleviate flooding on roadways, especially West End Avenue in Ventnor Heights, such as a sea wall.
- A well-designed community. No more flooding or bridge closures. Address sewer overflow during high-tide.
- An informed community
- A good alert system
- An advanced power grid to avoid outages. Consider burying power lines.
- One participant sees these challenges as an inherent part of life in a coastal area. She does not foresee any real solutions to them. The ocean is there, and it is unstoppable. If one wants to live on the beach, one must be prepared. The community or the government cannot fully protect you from nature.