

## You First Podcast Episode 46: Hurricane Season and Disaster Preparedness

**Keith Casebonne:** You're listening to "You First," the Disability Rights Florida podcast. On this episode, we're talking about the upcoming hurricane season, disaster preparedness resources, and more.

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**Maddie Crowley:** Hey, everyone. Welcome back to the You First podcast. My name is Maddie.

**Keith:** I'm Keith. On today's show, we're talking with our coworker, Bryan Russell, who is the Emergency Management Coordinator at Disability Rights Florida. He's going to give us some insight into the summer of storms that's about to happen and what you can do to best prepare.

**Maddie:** With June 1st being the beginning of hurricane season, we wanted to bring our attention back to this topic and really emphasize the importance of preparedness and safety, with some special focus on what that may mean for folks with disabilities.

**Keith:** As Floridians know, it can be a real mixed bag as to what storms we're going to get. Hurricanes impact other states around the country. We're hoping this episode will be helpful for people even beyond those in our state.

**Maddie:** Definitely. While it might be hurricane season, people in Florida and individuals across the country experience a variety of severe weather, natural disasters, and things like that beyond hurricanes. Bryan will talk with us about some of these best practices, how they can be considered, outside of these summer months, for other disasters, and how we can always remain prepared and safe.

**Keith:** Certainly. Without further ado, here's our chat with Bryan.

**Maddie:** Hi, Bryan. Thank you so much for being on the podcast today. Before we get started, can you introduce yourself? Tell us a bit about you and your work at DRF.

**Bryan Russell:** Sure. Hi, Maddie. Yes, I am Bryan Russell. I am the emergency management coordinator with Disability Rights Florida. What that means in real terms is working to make sure that people with disabilities and their families have what they need before, during, and after a disaster.

If that means helping them access a shelter, then we'll do that. If that means providing tips and information on, "How do I prepare for a disaster? How do I survive a hurricane? Do I stay, or do I evacuate? How do I make those decisions?" yes, it's providing that information to people with disabilities, their caregivers, and their service providers.

It's also training people with disabilities. It's also training providers of people with disabilities, providing some type of disability awareness training for shelter staff, for emergency management professionals. It's continuing to be trained in and to participate in trainings for disasters and for emergencies.

A lot of the daily life of an emergency manager is when we're not responding to a disaster, we're preparing and training for the next one.

**Maddie:** So much preparation goes into prepping. In Florida, we have plenty of hurricanes that we deal with each year, or tropical storms. Then it also looks different across country.

We're going to be talking a bit about our work here in Florida, and some of these resources and information may be helpful to you if you're not living in Florida, but you might be experiencing different natural disasters or climate-related issues that might not be as applicable to what we're talking about today because we're going to focus more on Florida.

I think this work is so important. A lot of work has gone into the disability awareness side of emergency management in the past couple of decades, but I feel like there's much more of a focus on disability as it relates to emergency management and preparedness.

Could you briefly touch on how you got into this work and what roles you've maybe filled in the past to bring yourself to where you are right now?

**Bryan:** Yeah. That's a very long, strange trip it's been with emergency management. Back in 2008, 2009, I was working for the Bay County Health Department, running a community health prevention program. I walked in my boss's office one day, and she introduced me to a gentleman named Sean, who was the health department's emergency manager.

He asked me how good I was in working with the media and doing press conferences and press releases. I said I was good...I have good relationships. At the time, I had a good relationship with some of the local reporters.

Then, my boss handed me a press release on a new virus that was just starting to come out. I was told that there would be a press conference in about an hour. They needed me to read this press release about H1N1, or the swine flu. I had no clue about it. It was literally three paragraphs and that was it.

At that point, that was my first introduction into the world of emergency management. For probably about six months, I worked with Sean running vaccine clinics.

That just diving headlong into all of the different emergency management trainings, like I said, running vaccine clinics, planning the clinics, the testing, and everything that goes along with vaccine management and emergency preparedness.

Then, after that, it was the Deepwater Horizon spill. We were working on some of those projects. Fast forward a few years, and I was running a Disability Employment Initiative and that's how I got into the disability service realm. I was running a Disability Employment Initiative in the Panhandle.

I was offered a job with Department of Health to run their disability and health program to help ensure that the Department of Health's chronic disease prevention programs were inclusive of people with disabilities and to improve access to public health and healthcare programs for the disability communities across the state, and that also included hurricanes and natural disasters.

Then coming back into emergency management, especially directly for people with disabilities. It started around the tail-end of Hurricane Irma and really ramped up with Hurricane Michael. A lot of the lessons we learned from Hurricane Irma, we applied to Hurricane Michael. Then the lessons we learned from Michael, we were able to then trend into hopefully making the next hurricane seasons better.

**Maddie:** Thank you for giving a background to that work. That frame is really important because disaster preparedness and emergency management is such a huge part of what we think of as health and access to health and remaining well and safe, all those things are part of wellness and health.

That timeline is really important, and I want to dig a little bit deeper into something that you said. It's like you're getting better each time because, especially in the disability community, when we talk about emergency management and disaster preparedness, it's a community that has been neglected as far as what the proper response could be and how to keep people safe.

That frame is really important that we're always trying to continue to create a more equitable response for disabled folks. Let's talk a little bit about what are some of the things that people with disabilities should know about when thinking about hurricane season coming up.

Hurricane season starts in June, and that is going to be here very quickly. There's things that people can do now to prepare. What are some advice for folks that are listening that are thinking about it upcoming and may want to take some action now?

**Bryan:** Absolutely. Yes, that's right. The Atlantic hurricane season lasts from June 1st to November 30th. Something that you can start doing now to prepare for hurricane season also translates well to preparing for any disaster.

If you're not a Floridian and you're listening in, say, Iowa, these are things to start doing now for any disaster, whether it's a hurricane or severe weather or wildfire, zombie apocalypse, whatever. Three things to keep in mind are start preparing now. Start collecting non-perishable food items like canned food, beverages, snack foods, things like that if you have any special dietary needs.

Start going ahead and stockpiling them now to last at least seven days. You want to have at least seven days' worth of non-perishable, prepackaged food and water on hand. Things like make sure you have a non-electric, manual can opener, napkins, paper cups, that kind of thing. Make sure to have at least a two-week supply of medication of all your medications.

Start writing now so you're not panicking when you decide at the last minute, "Oh shoot. Storm's coming. I'm going to get all my medications ready." Go ahead and start now. Just listing the names and the doses and the dosage of your medications. The good news about medications is when the governor makes an emergency declaration.

When you hear on the news, the governor has declared a state of emergency for your county or for the state, that allows you to go ahead if you're getting close on your refills, if you're getting like, "All right, I've got about a week's worth of medicine before I have to refill it," go ahead and get a refill.

That allows you to go ahead and get up to a month's worth of refill on all your medications because that's something you don't want to run out of if your pharmacy is impacted by the hurricane. The things to go ahead and you can start now stocking up on is flashlights, batteries, a NOAA Weather Radio. Not just for radio, but a NOAA Weather Radio.

Make sure that you have all of your important documents in one area, social security cards, banking information, medical record, insurance, your health insurance card, other personal documents.

If you have pets, I know a lot of us do, make sure to have everything you need for them, too. If you evacuate whether you go to a shelter or a friend's house or wherever you evacuate to, take your pets with you. We saw that after Hurricane Katrina, so many pets were left behind and that caused a lot of problems. Take your pets with you.

Every county has at least one pet shelter. Make sure that you have enough pet food and water to last at least seven days. Any of their medical records, vaccination information, make sure to have it with you. If you start asking your vet now about if they can provide it now. Also have a carrier or a crate, muzzle, leash, water, food bowls.

A reminder, too, with service animals if you do have a service animal, you need the same supplies for your service animal. In case of a disaster, everywhere you go, you can have your service animal with you. You cannot get turned away because of your service animal, so you're good there. Also, make sure that you keep your vehicle filled with gas prior to the storm hitting.

Just make sure you also have a basic first aid kit, dress for the weather, those kinds of things. As far as preparing for a hurricane, another thing you want to look at is what's called Know Your Zone, Know Your Home. We've seen this, especially during Hurricane Ian, know your flood zone more than your evacuation zone, know where your flood zones are.

If you live in a flood zone, you need to know that now. We saw a lot of flooding in the interior of Florida along the peninsula where a lot of times people didn't have to worry about flooding before. They were having to worry about flooding because of all the rain that Ian draw.

If you live in an evacuation zone, if you live in a coastal county, know if you live in an evacuation zone. Those are easy to find. You can go to [floridadisaster.org](http://floridadisaster.org) and they have a link to knowing where you'll [indecipherable 13:40] and finding out that information.

Specifically for people with disabilities, some other resources. Go ahead and start making a plan now. If you decide to evacuate, one of the best things you could probably do is identify any friends and family that don't live in your center. Identify any friends or family that live outside of your hometown.

Go ahead and start now talking to them about, "Hey, if we have a Cat-3 hurricane coming tonight and we evacuate, can we come, stay with you for a few days?" Just because being real, shelter life is not fun. Whether you're in a special needs shelter or a general population shelter, a shelter is a lifeboat. It's definitely not your home.

If you can go stay with friends in a home outside of the main hurricane area, chances are they'll still have electricity, and you'll still have all the comforts of home.

**Keith:** Let's talk a little more about that choice of whether to evacuate or to stay. Before I kick into the question though, I do want to mention that pretty much all these resources that you're referring to and others, you can get from our website if you go to [disabilityrightsflorida.org/disasterprep](http://disabilityrightsflorida.org/disasterprep), all one word, disasterprep.

That'll take you to our disaster and emergency planning section of our website where you can find all of this, including a separate page of hurricane-specific resources as well.

Obviously, if there's an order to evacuate, you do it. You have to evacuate. If there's not an order and it's up to you, what's some of the advice that you would give to someone as to whether they should make that choice to evacuate or to stay whether that's to stay a friend or family's house or to go to a shelter and then maybe tell us a little bit about what...

This is a specific to Florida thing, but there are what's called special needs shelters and registries to those shelters as well. Tell us a bit about that, and how that system works.

**Bryan:** It's an evacuation. Should I stay or should I go? At least, here in Florida, we see that a lot. During Hurricane Ian, not near as many people evacuated as...When I say we, it's collective emergency management, state and local emergency managers. Not near as many people evacuated that we had planned.

We were assuming that a lot of people would go to shelters, a lot of people would just leave the area, but a lot of people stayed at home. We're still trying to find out why, honestly. Should you stay or should you go? One of the guidelines that I look at on a personal side is my comfort level.

Honestly, do I really want to live three to seven days without electricity? Do I have what I need for me and my family to survive for three to seven days? If you do and you can, then sure. You're also going to have to look at the potential impact of the storm. Will it produce a lot of rain, or will it produce a lot of wind?

Also, look at the resources that you have. What will you need? Where will you stay safest? That is one of the biggest thing. One thing that we always try to tell -- especially people with disabilities -- is there is no hurricane just a, there is no just a storm. You can have a truck.

What was I going to say was Hurricane Sally that hit the Northeast United States was a Category-1 storm and produced devastating storm surge, flooding to that area. You can have, in terms of ranking system, a minor storm that causes a lot of damage. Don't always look at the strength of the storm.

Look at the available resources you have, what you have at home, and where you feel it would be...you and your family would be the safest and go from there.

Getting to shelters. In Florida, we have two different types of shelters. We have a general population shelter and special needs shelters.

Special needs shelters typically are for people who are electric-dependent, meaning if they depend on electricity for survival, whether it's you have to have oxygen, you have any medication that must be refrigerated, you occasionally will need some type of assistance breathing. That's when you would go to a special needs shelter.

In order to go to a special needs shelter, it's best if you voluntarily register yourself on the special needs registry. We have links on our website to the special needs registry. The special needs registry is useful for people with disabilities, people with any type of access or functional need. If you have any type of disability, it's totally up to you, but it allows your county health department to know what you need.

As far as evacuation, if you have a transportation difficulty, if you need transportation to a shelter, you can register on the special needs registry and let them know, "I need transportation to a shelter." Before the storm, they will come and pick you up and take you to the shelter.

It also allows the special needs shelter to be able to plan for you, your specific needs. If you need personal care assistance, if you need transportation, if you need electricity for "Hey. I'm diabetic. My medications have to be refrigerated," they can already have a plan for that. It's fairly easy to complete. Like I said, the link to the special needs registry is on our website.

Special needs shelters also are required to have generators. Special needs shelters will maintain electricity and will have power. General population shelters are just that. It's a lifeboat, not a cruise ship. They're there to keep you safe from the storm.

They are required to be ADA accessible, yes. 9 times out of 10, they are in schools. They are in hardened facilities, but they may or may not maintain electricity. A lot of times during the storm, the general population shelters will lose power. If you decide to evacuate to a general population shelter, plan on that. Plan on maybe going without electricity there. They are structurally safe.

General population shelters are a lot more cramped. They may provide food, but you want to make sure you bring food on your own, especially if you have special dietary needs.

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**Andrew Gurza:** Hello there. Welcome to "Disability After Dark," the podcast shining a bright light on disability stories. I'm your host, disability awareness consultant, Andrew Gurza. This is a podcast where you sit down with your close disabled friends and talk about things in the disability experience that we never ever get to shine a light on. That's why it's called Disability After Dark.

Each week, we'll explore everything from disability to ableism, to sexuality, and so much more, including things like disability grief, disability joy, and so many different conversation topics around the disabled experience.

We even have special bonus content, like "Quarantine and Chill," a podcast within Disability After Dark where we explore the effects of the ongoing pandemic, or "A Bump'n Podcast," where we talk all about sex and disability and sex toys on the show. Tune in wherever you get your podcast. Let's shine a bright light on disability stories. Thanks, everybody. Bye.

**Kathy O'Connell:** Dating with a disability can be hard. I know that because I struggled for years to date successfully with a disability. Having cerebral palsy, I encountered many people not even considering me as a potential partner. If they did, there were judgments and attitudes.

Successful dating and finding a healthy, joyful relationship is entirely possible. I finally figured out how to do this and have been with my husband for over 15 years now. The key, it's to keep trying, continue to go for what you want, despite the heartbreak and rejections, and believe in your potential. It's a dating and relationship partner.

I know that sounds very simple, and it's not. That's why I created Dating Made Easier, the monthly membership that will teach you how to get the words out to you want, feel more comfortable and confident dating, and give you get consistent support with monthly workshops, brainstorming, and networking. Go to [radiantabilities.com](http://radiantabilities.com), select dating resources, and join today.

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**Maddie:** I appreciate all this information, [indecipherable 24:19] . During Hurricane Ian, going back a bit to Keith's question and then touching on some stuff that you mentioned, there was a lot of blaming of people for not leaving their homes by, not Disability Rights Florida, but on social media or on the news.

Like, "How could these people not leave, how could you not have known?" or this, that, and the other. First of all, Hurricane Ian was a storm that had a very clear trajectory to go up coast through Tampa, through Gainesville, etc., and then it moved and basically hovered over Central Florida for a very long time. No one could have really predicted that especially that's just how hurricanes work.

I know we've talked about special needs shelters and some of these resources to be able to better prepared time-wise so that your needs are met in the case of this very real emergency situation that you might have to leave your home.

If you could maybe speak a little bit to that blaming of people with disabilities, where people just assume that everybody can evacuate, everybody can have everything they need, and everybody can be prepared.

I'm curious if we can address that a little bit and maybe offer some additional guidance as to how some folks can instead of blaming people with disabilities and maybe people from lower SES neighborhoods, less access to transportation, things like that, rural areas, how they can better prepare.

Help everybody spread the word about how people can get what they need instead of having this victim blaming complex continue.

**Bryan:** Sure. Those are great points and great questions. Teeing off what you said about the forecasting, yeah, a lot of the issue with forecasting is, and I'm not sure any one certain group is at fault, but so much revolves around with the cone of uncertainty.

A lot of the models that we're moving it, "Oh, it's going to possibly go up into Tampa and then up through Gainesville to go across the state that way." That was where the center of that cone was going to be.

The problem with that is a lot of people just take that as, "OK, that's where the whole hurricane is going to hit is where the center is going to be," where the eye will hit, so to speak. That's why a lot of people just instinctively view it that way.

Obviously, that didn't happen, but we were talking about that at a emergency management conference I was at recently as one of the reasons, especially in Southwest Florida, a lot of people decided to not evacuate and to stay home because so much of the forecasting was pushing it up into the Tampa area.

I had friends that actually evacuated. They live in Gibsonton, Florida, which is near Tampa, and they evacuated their home and they went down into Sarasota. That was obviously not the place to be in during Hurricane Ian. By the time they got there and got settled in, it was too late for them to leave, or they just had to ride it out at a friend's house.

They were OK, but at the same time when watching hurricane forecasts, it's always best to just imagine the entire storm. Take the satellite image of the storm and put it over the entire state. That's where it's going to hit. Hurricane Ian impacted the entire peninsula of the state and make your decisions based on that. Not necessarily where the cone is showing.

Until we can get better forecasting technology, that's how I personally would do it is just take the entire satellite image of the storm and just move it in the general forecasted direction. Wherever you see those bands hitting, that's where it's going to hit. That's where you're going to get the impacts.

**Keith:** People forget the cone is still just the amalgam of all the various paths it could go. It doesn't consider the actual width of the storm. The storm can affect areas far wider than that cone.

**Bryan:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Keith:** People sometimes see the cone and think, "Oh, I'm not in the cone. I'm fine."

**Bryan:** Yeah. I just want to make this point and then I'll come back to answer the other questions. During this past hurricane season, there weren't as many named storms, and a lot of the storms that were named didn't even impact Florida. When you're looking at the initial projections or the initial forecasts, currently for 2023, the current hurricane season forecast is 13 named storms, six hurricanes.

Of those six hurricanes, three will be major hurricanes, which is a Category 3 or higher. Now, with all that being said, it only takes one storm, hitting your area to be a bad hurricane season. When you're hearing forecast come out, and you'll be hearing more hurricane season forecasts come out around middle of May. Mid to late May, you'll hear more forecasts come out.

Just keep that in mind, it only takes one storm for you to be directly impacted for it to be a bad season. Now, going back to what people can do to make better evacuation decisions, evacuation

is not easy for a lot of people, especially with disabilities or people who are middle to low-income. That's tough because you have to plan.

Unless you're going into a shelter or you're going to stay with friends, you have to pay for a hotel, and then you're going to have to pay to eat out, and eating out is costly. Hotels are very costly, especially in Florida. Depending on the time of year, hurricane season also falls in our biggest tourist season. Hotels are going to have...It's going to cost more money.

If it's in the late hurricane season, which a lot of our...A lot of Florida storms happen between August and October. For many of us, that's also college football season. If you're in Gainesville, Tampa, Miami, Tallahassee, if you evacuate to any of those hotels, be prepared to pay a lot more money during football season.

Financially, it's hard. Physically, it's hard. If you have transportation issues, it is hard. That's why preparing and planning is so vital. That's why making sure that you can access transportation if you need it. Plan now to access transportation, public transportation, or special needs shelter transportation out of your house.

Make sure that you start planning now to take care of that. If you decide, "Hey, if we have to evacuate, I want to call my friends now and let them know, 'All right, there's a storm coming. We want to get out of here. Can you come pick us up?'" Reach out to friends and family if you need to.

**Keith:** One last question. If, unfortunately, you are affected by a storm and you've been displaced or there's damage or what have you, then what can someone do at that point? What are the best courses of action after a storm to start to rebuild and get things back in order?

**Bryan:** Probably some of the best options would be within your disaster plan, make sure you have all of your homeowners' insurance documents. If you have homeowners or renters insurance, any type of insurance, make sure you have that with you. I know it's real stressful.

What would be really good now would be, with your phone, we all have cameras on your phone, go ahead and start taking pictures now of your house, of the exterior of your house, of the inside of your house. Start taking pictures now to document it before a disaster. Then, after the storm, the best thing to do is call your insurance company and call FEMA and apply for FEMA assistance.

Even if you think you weren't that impacted, apply for individual assistance. When you do, you'll be able to then get FEMA to assist you. They can help cover things that you need. Basically, FEMA and your personal insurance company is who you want to reach out to.

A few tips for applying for FEMA, answer their questions fully. If you're without power for a week, whatever you had in your refrigerator is done. Do not eat it. Do not consume it. Toss it out. You're probably going to lose a week's worth of food in your refrigerator. Make sure that you document that in your individual assistance request.

Really be detailed and all of that just because you think your neighbor may have lost his entire house and you may not have and you still have a home, you were still impacted, too. Focus on your own need. A lot of times, it's hard for us to do, but yeah, document that.

You'd want to apply for FEMA assistance. Then when you're approved for that, FEMA can also provide transitional sheltering assistance, which basically, they will pay for up to six months for you to stay in a hotel while your home gets repaired, while you're able to basically figure out what you're going to need. Negotiate with them or with your insurance company to get your home repaired, rebuilt, whatever.

Definitely, FEMA also will have what's called Disaster Resource Centers. Usually, in most shelters, all of that is going to be available, assistance with registering for FEMA, assistance for registering for assistance from the state.

Most of the shelters you go to will have representatives from all those agencies on hand to help walk you through that process. If not, you can always reach out to Disability Rights Florida, and we can help you walk through that process as well.

**Maddie:** Do you have anything else that you would like to add that you feel we haven't covered, that you feel is important to talk about?

**Bryan:** Just planning now during what's called blue skies. Blue sky planning is key. If you start now building your hurricane kit or your disaster kit...If you start now, it's not going to be so much of a daunting task when we see the dreaded cone of uncertainty start popping up on the news.

You're not going to have to start fighting people for toilet paper and bottled water, which apparently now we all need, is lots and lots of toilet paper during a disaster. No matter the disaster, it's always toilet paper.

Preparation is key. Within that, build a personal support network. Get to know your friends. Get to know your neighbors. Like that old song from "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," who are the people in your neighborhood? Get to know...Check on them, that kind of thing.

Don't panic. Just plan. If you need any help with planning, reach out to us. Like Keith said, check out our website. We've got a lot of good materials and tool kits on how to prepare an emergency kit.

This goes for more than just hurricanes. If you are out of Florida, this goes for tornadoes, for wildfires, earthquakes. Climate change is impacting everybody now in different ways. We're going to have more storms, definitely going to have more and more powerful storms now.

**Maddie:** This was so informative. We're really glad you could join us to talk about this stuff. Like Bryan said, we have all of these resources and information available on our website in much, much more detail with different guides, and brochures, and things like that that you're able to access at any time.

I see the main message is to be prepared, start making a plan now and making those connections, and resources, and community connections now so you're best prepared when the storm does

come in the next coming months. Thank you, Bryan, for being on the show. We appreciate you taking the time.

**Bryan:** Thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity.

**Keith:** Thank you, Bryan, for being our guest on today's episode. It's such an important topic. We hope that our listeners found it useful and were able to learn something new.

**Maddie:** For sure. We'd love to hear about what you learned and took away from the show. Feel free to reach out to us on social media, maybe comment on a post or two on our Disability Rights Florida account to help us spread awareness on this topic.

Additionally, you can help us be found by more listeners by sharing this episode with a friend or giving us a like, review, or rating wherever you're listening. We want to keep making content that you enjoy and find useful. That will definitely help us do so.

**Keith:** Stay tuned. More episodes are coming real soon. The best way to be notified when new episodes drop is to subscribe. We're on Apple Podcast, Spotify, YouTube, Google, Amazon, almost anywhere you get podcasts.

**Maddie:** For more information and transcripts of each episode, visit [disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast](http://disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast).

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You can learn more about the services we provide, explore a vast array of resources on a variety of disability-related topics, and complete an online intake on our website at [disabilityrightsflorida.org](http://disabilityrightsflorida.org). You can also call us at 1-800-342-0823. Thank you for listening to You First, the Disability Rights Florida podcast.

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