

Locals create disaster guide for deaf

Democrat and Chronicle - November 11, 2005

Greg Livadas

Staff writer

When the 1991 ice storm cut off power to parts of Monroe County for more than a week, Matt Searls found himself writing notes to utility crews, firefighters and police who happened to come down his road in Pittsford to find out what was going on.

Searls, who is deaf, had no electricity to watch captioned television and couldn't hear a portable radio for recovery updates.

"I said, 'This can't happen again. We have to be better prepared,'" he said.

So Searls, a board member of the local chapter of the American Red Cross, and others from the area's deaf community have just completed a 14-page guide to help deaf individuals be better prepared in the event of an emergency.

The guide, the first of its kind, will be made available throughout the country.

"It doesn't have all of the answers, but it will help you develop a plan to help you take control of the situation," said Pam Hatch, a Red Cross volunteer and a retired principal of Rochester School for the Deaf.

Hatch recently returned from Louisiana, where she helped deaf victims of Hurricane Katrina try to receive aid from the Red Cross.

"They had very little experience in dealing with the deaf," she said. "Here in Rochester, we have a large deaf community and have many, many services available to use. For people in Louisiana, these services were not available to them."

The booklet discusses community disaster plans, warning notification systems, emergency contacts, escape routes and emergency kit supplies.

Although much of the information would apply to hearing people as well, things such as making sure to have a battery-operated radio would be useless for deaf people. However, they should have supplies of batteries for hearing aids, text pagers and vibrating alarms.

Kathleen Dollinger-Meyer of Pittsford called it "a great tool for ourselves to prepare for the future if an emergency does arise. There are times when there's a power outage, there's no TV, no computer, and I can't hear to use the phone or radio. We have to rely on neighbors and try lip reading."

Donna Nelligan, a mental health therapy aide from Brighton, said the brochure will help eliminate confusion and chaos in the event of an emergency.

"They will know they will have the confidence to survive a disaster," she said.

Searls, Dollinger-Meyer, Nelligan and Hatch each completed the Monroe County Community Emergency Response Team training course, which trains citizens to help themselves and their neighbors in emergencies.

The Red Cross printed 32,000 of the brochures, which were reviewed and approved by the staff at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

To see a copy online, have one mailed or to request an instructor to talk to your community group about disaster preparedness, visit www.rochesterredcross.com. GLIVADAS@DemocratandChronicle.com