LEFT BEHIND: THE DILEMMA of TRANSIT for the DISABLED and the POOR in a DISASTER

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Abstract
In the hours following the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001, thousands of persons in New York and Washington, D.C. evacuated the cities on foot. This every-man-for-himself evacuation posed unique challenges for many individuals with disabilities that impeded their swift movement. The recent natural disaster in New Orleans and the surrounding region echoed again the dilemma faced by persons with disabilities as they struggled to meet the challenges of disability compounded by limited resources for personal evacuation. This paper focuses on research in the area of transit security for persons with disabilities and obstacles confronted by persons with disabilities including the impact of poverty in evacuation.
In the desperate minutes and hours immediately following the September 11, 2001 bombings in New York and Washington, D.C., thousands of people fled the disasters on foot. This every-man-for-himself kind of evacuation raised serious questions about the plight of persons with disabilities who were dependent on public transportation to travel to the effected locations, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and further dependent on the effectiveness of city rescue policies and plans to evacuate sometime numerous stories and very congested streets to safety. In fact, Pauls (2002) has pointed out that before September 11, 2001, relatively little was known about evacuation and as of his writing in 2002, there was little indication that much had been learned from 9/11 especially as related to the evacuation of high-rise buildings. Four years later, the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina raised new awareness of the paucity of emergency preparedness for people with disabilities.

While it is easy to think of the challenges confronting persons who rely on wheelchairs for transportation, effective emergency policy and planning requires that thinking about disabilities expand beyond mobility challenges or visual and hearing impairments. The needs of individuals with hypertension, cardiac conditions, respiratory problems, and other conditions exacerbated by stress must also be considered. Others at risk include persons who have disabilities such as mental retardation who rely on daily routine to function successfully, persons with attention deficit disorders who are overly distracted by the chaos of competing visual and auditory cues often present in an emergency and others with mental illness who might tend to withdraw rather than seek assistance in a crisis. For example, in a study of how people with learning disabilities evacuated a staged fire emergency at a residential facility, Shields, Smyth, Boyce and Silcock (1999) found that while residents sought their own safety, they did not warn others as is commonly expected. They concluded that “there is clearly a need to link learning difficulty with predictable evacuation behaviour in order to devise appropriate training programmes; allocate accommodation, and determine evacuation priorities related to emergency scenarios” (p.48). However, this study stands as an anomaly in that there is very little empirical data on safely evacuating persons with disabilities.

A report released by the National Council on Disability in spring 2005 concluded that most disaster plans are “designed for people who can move quickly, walk, see and hear, and that people with disabilities are typically left out of the planning process” (Weiss 2005, ¶6). For example, when announcements were made from patrol cars in the 2003 California wildfires, people who were deaf or hard of hearing were not warned. Although there were televised announcements, there was no closed captioning and without written information, deaf and hard of hearing individuals could not tell which neighborhoods were at risk (McDonough 2005).

According to McDonough, after the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, plans were put into place to aid persons with disabilities in an emergency. Still, regular drills were not conducted and current employees often did not know about the availability of evacuation chairs or where the chairs were stored. Some persons assigned to help, fled leaving people with disabilities behind (McDonough 2005). As well documented, we now know that persons with severe disabilities chose one of two options. They either,
refused to be left behind and helped to coordinate their own evacuations and often the evacuation of others or, unfortunately, they followed the protocol and waited for firemen to arrive. We now know that at the same time, many firemen were exhausted from carrying heavy equipment up dozens of flights of stairs and basically unprepared to affect the enormity of the situation. Many disabled individuals who waited, perished.

Using the events of 9/11 as a springboard for discussion and the development of much need strategies, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) developed directives to address the emergency preparedness needs of persons with disabilities (Fire Safety 2005). In fall 2003, the National Organization on Disability conducted a high profile and very well attended conference on disaster planning for persons with disabilities. In July 2004, President Bush mandated that all federal agencies develop emergency plans that address the needs of employees with disabilities (Kauffman 2004). By September 2005, the Department of Transportation had developed a new website detailing emergency preparedness information for persons with disabilities such as how to evacuate certain modes of transportation or how to respond in a natural disaster. This site also provides numerous links to related websites. Clearly, by the fall of 2005, there was a much better idea of what the issues are and what is needed than in the case of 9/11.

Yet, the nation watched in shock as the disaster of Hurricane Katrina began to unfold in New Orleans, Louisiana and the surrounding area. Through television media, we saw scene after scene of a failed evacuation or, as we later understood, a non-evacuation. Like Marie Antionette, we might have said, ‘why didn’t they evacuate?’ but only later did the nation begin to realize the inevitable crisis that must ensue when people who have no resources are left to their own resources when disaster strikes.

Many of those left behind in the New Orleans area disaster were people with disabilities. Most telling were the pictures of people who had fled to their roof tops to escape the rising waters and had written, sometimes on the roof itself, pleas for help detailing diabetic conditions and a need for insulin which in the best of circumstances is stored carefully and administered regularly. We saw people with disabilities lying on stretchers waiting for help and being hoisted up into helicopters when help arrived. In two news stories recounted by Berube (2005), we heard of one woman trapped in her wheelchair until the water rose to the level of her chin and she managed to scramble onto a table in her home and of another who had a text message sent asking for help only to have the FEMA representative respond “there is nothing we can do for this person now”. We saw scenes of people in wheelchairs being ferried along through waist deep water by friends and relatives and we saw people sitting still in death in the wheelchair.

At least, some of us saw that that. A good bit of the nation was stunned by the realization that many of the effected people were African American and mesmerized by images of a New Orleans that they had never seen before. The news focused for days on the looting that followed and in shock, the nation judged the residents who were left behind as being morally unworthy of aid. We could not see the big picture of race, poverty, and disability set against a backdrop of dependence on transportation.

In a nation deeply dependent on truck and rail to deliver the necessities of life, here we saw people already abandoned before the storm hit, now trapped in knee deep water, most of what they owned ruined, and essentially cut off from the order of daily life where swinging by the store to pick up what we need is a normal part of the American travel trip. Most days we are able to go about our daily lives without ever having to
imagine what a day or week or several weeks might be like if no truck or train delivers all of the commodities that magically appear on shelves in thousands of communities across the country. With the break down in services and security, the residents who were left behind in New Orleans were in part compelled, as many would be, to fashion their own rescue, fend for themselves and pillage what was worth salvaging of meager remains.

**Transit and Social Justice as Components of Evacuation**

Nevertheless, it must be noted that many in the New Orleans area were left behind long before Hurricane Katrina hit. Specifically, years of inequity contributed to a deficit of the one key resource needed to flee the impending disaster, access to transportation. In citing the history of African American use of transit, Bullard (2004) identified the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision routed in Louisiana and the progenitor of the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine of racial discrimination in seating on railroad cars. Bullard also identified the first successful bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and 1956 as key examples of African American efforts to gain equal access to transit services. Consequently, transit, a vital link between the poor and disenfranchised and vital community-based resources, has been the focus of many movements for social equity.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, 67.3% of the population of New Orleans was African American and 28.1% of the population was Caucasian. Fifty-three percent were women. The census also found that 23.6% of the population between age 21 and 64 had disabilities and 50% of persons over age 65 was disabled. In an emergency, these individuals will need accommodations such as a wheelchair, the services of an interpreter, a guide dog, refrigeration of medications, or the operation of needed equipment. Also, 10% of persons between 5-20 years old had disabilities indicating that many children and adolescents, like the traumatized and disabled adults caring for them, may need specific accommodations due to disabling conditions. Finally, 131,000 or 27.9% of individuals was below the poverty level. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2005) concluded that based on the 2000 U.S. Census data, over 450,000 people with disabilities reside in the Gulf coast area affected by Hurricane Katrina. It is likely that many more were affected by traumatic or maybe temporary disabilities resulting from injuries sustained in the disaster. Given the statistics on race, disability and poverty, we may assume that poverty and disability, as well as perhaps race, were factors for many residents of New Orleans in the Katrina disaster.

Although the focus on the race of the victims seems far afield from a discussion on the needs of people with disabilities in a disaster, in reality, 24.3% of African Americans reported a disability in the 2000 census. This statistic makes it likely that in a disaster, many individuals needing assistance will be African American. Therefore, future evacuations might be impacted as well.

Bullard contends, that because transportation services have emerged in a race and class-conscious society, the losers are “the poor, powerless, and people of color” (p. 19). Taking this concept a step further, Neal (2001) states that “people without cars and people with limited access to cars are disproportionately low-income people of color, low-income women, the elderly and disabled” (¶ 1).

A recent New York University poll of preparation for disaster found that most Americans are no more prepared for a disaster than before hurricane Katrina and
subsequent Hurricane Rita. The study further found that the poor were most disaffected by the local and federal mismanagement that followed the hurricane concluding that what they really needed for evacuation was money (“Americans Don’t Know What to do in Disaster”, November 19, 2005). In the days immediately following the hurricane, Michael Brown, who was then head of FEMA, predicted a huge death toll because, in his mind, people had essentially refused to evacuate the city (Altman 2005). He did not understand the magnitude of the problem. Jeff Sussman writing in the Journal of Family Medicine said it well when he said, “fortunately, my relatives, and friends, and friends of friends, are predominately wealthy, mobile, professional, and able to endure such disasters, however momentous. They checked into hotels, drove or flew away, fled the maelstrom enveloping the city, and are busy filing insurance claims” (p. 832).

Conversely, Loeb (2006) concluded that while people with resources could escape, large numbers of people had nowhere to go, and no transportation or money needed to leave. Clearly, people with the financial resources to own cars or purchase airline tickets and hotels stays were most likely to achieve an effective personal evacuation in the face of governmental failure to evacuate everyone.

In the state of Louisiana, 30,000 people rely on bus services compared to 10,000 in Alabama and 2,200 in Mississippi (U.S. Census 2000). According to Hutchinson (2005) one of three residents of New Orleans does not have a car. Because few resources are located in relatively poor communities, citizens rely on public transit to transport them to the resources. If individuals, because of poverty, disability or the intertwining of the two, must rely on public transit daily, they will need government sponsored transit in the event of a natural or man-made disaster. According Brian Wolshon a Louisiana state consultant on the evacuation plan (as cited by Altman 2005) the evacuation plan developed by New Orleans gave little regard to the “low-mobility” population meaning persons who were old, sick, and poor with no cars or other way to evacuate. Ironically, the I-10 highway in New Orleans was built through a part of the African American community according to Wright (1997) but a highway is of little immediate use to people who do not have a car.

Citing Cole and Foster, Bullard (2004) makes the point that race has long been used to sort people into physical environments. This is usually accomplished through discrimination in housing based on race or ethnicity. For example, in New Orleans, at the end of the Civil War, Caucasians were able to build homes in the highest areas with least likelihood of flooding because of natural levees while African Americans occupied the less favorable locations that often were washed away (Bullard & Johnson, 1997). In the recent case of Hurricane Katrina, Altman (2005), stated that according to The Progress Report, flooding was worse in the Lower Ninth Ward which is nearly 98% Black and where the average household income is less than $27,500 annually with a quarter of residents earning less than $10,000 per year. Housing discrimination, as environmental segregation, has long been known to separate selected groups from job opportunities, health care options, entertainment and other community resources readily available to others. To the list of lost amenities, we may now add personal safety.

**Other Transportation Issues in the New Orleans Area Disaster**

In addition to the challenges Hurricane Katrina presented to persons with disabilities and the poor without cars, there were other nuances of evacuation worth
noting here. Specifically, some things went right for people with cars. The emergency management plan included a relatively new “contra flow” traffic system which makes all lanes one directional. Consequently, the evacuation from New Orleans which took eight hours during the Hurricane Ivan evacuation a year earlier, took only four hours during the Hurricane Katrina evacuation. Still, there were fuel shortages on the evacuation routes that left many motorists stranded (Leuenberger and Bartle 2005).

Plant (2005) proposed that a significant part of the problem seen in Louisiana has resulted from how we have shaped and maintained the infrastructure. First, the physical infrastructure has received little attention. Additionally, the decision to transfer emergency and transportation functions from the federal Department of Transportation (DOT) to the Department of Homeland Security put terrorism above other emergency issues in importance diminishing the capability of the DOT. A second decision, to move FEMA under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security, also proved critical in the Katrina disaster. Finally, Plant maintains that we have essentially played favorites subsidizing some transportation modes such as trucking, freight rail and commercial air travel while other modes such as passenger and commuter rail have had to pay their own way with user fees. This imbalance in modes has led to our “fine-tuning our system to perform well for several classes of users, generally those perceived to be the social and economic winners in a highly competitive order” (p. 4). In the category of the high-end elite, he includes, global commerce, top-end shippers, affluent users of air travel for business and recreation for whom a very effective transportation system has been developed.

Important to our discussion here is Plant’s idea that disruption in this fine-tuned system brings chaos to the non-vehicle owning, to the motorists and residents held captive by the evacuation traffic jams, as well as many others victimized by the slow mobilization of private sector resources on which so many deftly depend. Specifically, Leuenberger and Bartle (2005) point out that there were distribution problems that complicated emergency management. They maintain that resources could not reach disaster victims fast enough despite an array of alternative modes of transportation, such as boats and helicopters used in the rescue efforts and the delivery of needed services to stranded individuals. With disaster relief efforts nearly collapsing entirely under the weight of a failing infrastructure, the poor and disabled waited days and weeks for aid. Ultimately, many were airlifted to other states to start a new life.

Transit for Persons with Disabilities in an Emergency

In all fairness, there were indications before Hurricane Katrina that readiness was not at a necessary level to serve the needs of persons with disabilities in an emergency. In spring 2005, Marshalls, a major retailer, was required to provide accessible evacuation routes in all of its stores nationwide as a result of a lawsuit in which a shopper with a disability was trapped in the basement of a Marshalls for over an hour during a fire alarm evacuation in 2002 (“Accessible Evacuation Procedures Required” 2005). Also in spring 2005, a small plane entered the restricted airspace around Washington, D.C. and the U.S. Capitol was evacuated. While others fled the building, Capitol staff members and visitors with disabilities were told to wait in the stairwell for further police assistance. This was not an effective strategy (“Recent Evacuation” 2005).
Unfortunately, we do not know where people will be when disaster strikes. Our project on *Transit Security in Small Urban Areas: Planning to Meet the Needs of Consumers with Disabilities* (Bethea-Whitfield, 2004) has focused on potential natural or man-made emergencies that could occur during transit or present situations that require transit evacuation. Miller (2001) detailed the extensive involvement of New Jersey (NJ) Transit in the emergency response to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. Buses were used to block the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels to prevent further attacks. Transit personnel provided shuttle bus service for first responders and volunteer disaster relief organizations, trains for evacuation, comfort to the injured, assistance to the Red Cross in the decontamination of the skin and clothing of survivors, and directions to trains and buses that transported thousands of displaced evacuees.

Although transit played a key role in recovery after the disaster, it is clear that the impact on the transit system and its personnel would be much more devastating if the transit system itself sustained a direct attack. Despite the focus of the Transportation Security Administration on airline safety, at the Mineta Transportation Institute, Jenkins and Gersten (2001) found that between 1997 and 2000, 195 terrorist attacks were targeted on nine surface transportation systems around the world. To this list, we may now add the 2004 train bombing in Madrid and the summer 2005 bombing of a bus in London in addition to numerous attacks on public transportation in middle-east countries. A suicide bomber killed thirty people on a bus in Iraq on December 8, 2005. In fact, Jenkins and Gersten found that buses were the target of 41 percent of attacks between 1997 and 2000. They also found that while bombings made up the largest percentage of attack modes, there were also ambushes, assaults, and armed robberies.

While the attacks in this country have been minimal, the requisite accessibility of transit systems makes them a prime target. Balog, Boyd and Caton (2003) reported that the 75 largest public transportation systems providing transit to 85 percent of all transportation passengers were allocating just 4 percent of their annual budgets to security personnel and equipment. The Federal Transportation Administration has acknowledged that of limited resources, the most aid must go to the largest transit agencies leaving smaller transit agencies to rely on networking with other local protective agencies to fashion a workable emergency plan. Considering, that many poor and disabled people must rely on bus transportation, Plant’s (2005) point is well repeated here that our infrastructure favors one class over another when priority is placed on security in air travel which is favored by the upper classes versus security in the more often attacked surface modes.

In the first phase of the *Transit Security* project (Bethea-Whitfield 2004) we had the idea to pull together bodies of literature on transit, transit security and transit for persons with disabilities. In the second phase, we interviewed managers at ten agencies (five small urban agencies and five large agencies for comparison) in North Carolina regarding how they select transit personnel relative to meeting the needs of persons with disabilities, what they foresaw relative to future emergencies and their planning and drilling activities. We found that 60 percent of large agencies and 80 percent of small agencies reported an assessment of attitudes and knowledge about disabilities in potential drivers and provided training in related American with Disabilities Act guidelines. Large agencies were more likely to report having trained paratransit drivers in emergency response procedures, to report having an emergency plan in place for paratransit users in
case of a disruptive event, and to have worked with local law enforcement fire departments and other emergency response agencies on a plan. Also, 100 percent of large agencies reported that they have told their riders what to do. In case the paratransit vehicle cannot return to pick them up. Very few agencies of any size had conducted a drill. Agencies in eastern North Carolina were able to draw on past experience with Hurricane Floyd in 1999 anticipating emergency response. Managers were rarely able to conceptualize a situation such as a terrorist in which they would not be able to operate.

In the third phase of the study, we interviewed transit operators relative to their attitudes and training to work with persons with disabilities and act in an emergency. We found that roughly 90 percent of drivers reported going beyond agency requirements to help persons with disabilities, felt that persons with disabilities will have special needs in an emergency, and reported that in case of an emergency they would stay behind or risk their own safety to insure the security of their riders with disabilities. Finally, nearly 100 percent of drivers reported that they will be willing to remain at work as long as needed to help with evacuation or rescue (Bethea-Whitfield 2005). These drivers view themselves as helper first and need the training and support of their agencies because they will likely choose to go the extra mile in an emergency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Currently there are numerous print and website resources available to emergency planners and persons with disabilities. The following is a sample:

- Easter Seals Project Action – *Emergency Evacuation: Safe Egress of Persons with Disabilities From Transit Systems*. This guide provides tips for transit agencies and persons with disabilities regarding how to plan for and maintain safety during and after an emergency.

- The Department of Transportation – *Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities*. This website provides extensive information on planning for and reacting to a variety of emergencies both planned and natural and provides valuable links to related sites on the subject.

- The National Organization on Disability through the Emergency Preparedness Initiative (EPI) – *The Emergency Readiness Wheel for People With Disabilities* - The wheel provides instructions on how to prepare for and respond to a variety of emergencies.

- American Red Cross – *Disaster Preparedness for People with Disabilities* - This guide, which is available on the web, provides details for people with disabilities on how to develop a personal support network, complete a personal assessment and gather disaster supplies.

Clearly, we know more now than we did. Sometimes, we just know what questions are. For example, the vigilance of airline passenger screening magically overlooks the inherent risk associated with thousands of bags and parcels transported in cargo areas daily without the benefit of any screening at all. We know that the 1993 and 2001 bombings of the World Trade Center raised serious concerns about the evacuation of high-rise buildings, yet we do not know enough about evacuation of any occupants and clearly need to know more about the safe evacuation of persons with disabilities.

We do know that the old ‘buddy system’ often does not work for a variety of reasons. The buddy might be out of the area when the emergency occurs, might abandon
the person with a disability or be overcome in the disaster. We are now recommending that the ‘buddy’ duties be allocated more widely. Additionally, unless plans are updated, the buddy might have moved on and not been replaced. While evacuation chairs may be purchased, newer employees might not know that the chairs exist or where they are stored. As in the spring 2005 incident at the U.S. Capitol, emergency plans might call for an evacuation protocol that ultimately leaves persons with disabilities waiting in danger for help that might not arrive.

More drills are needed (Axt, 2003). Both people with disabilities and people without disabilities need to practice what to do in an emergency. The more people know their roles, the better they can step into them when a disaster strikes. Again, because people leave jobs or apartment buildings, and management changes, there must be a commitment to ongoing drills so that newer members of a team are able to do their part.

One of the best current strategies is to include people with disabilities in disaster management planning. These consumers will have a better idea of what their needs will be in an emergency and how those needs can best be met. This might work well in work-based planning but not as well in city or county planning because people with disabilities are often poor people and the needs of the poor are rarely ever given equal consideration with the needs of the more affluent.

The December 2005 incident in which air marshals fatally shot a mentally ill airline passenger who claimed to have a bomb, offers a dramatic example of how the interests of security can collide with the inherent vulnerability of people with disabilities. In this example as in the Hurricane Katrina disaster, we are learning that we live in a very complex society and the needs of citizens must be accounted for in a myriad of ways. Just days after the hurricane struck, Senator Rick Santorum is quoted as saying that there may be a need to consider tougher penalties for people who refuse to evacuate. Probably, he like many others, was not thinking of the low rate of automobile ownership in New Orleans where nearly a third of households do not own a car and 35 percent of Black households in particular do not own a car (“Lack of Automobility Key to New Orleans Tragedy.” 2005). Now with the perspective of several months since the Hurricane, we hear more about the “car-free” lifestyle and how people who choose this lifestyle are negatively affected in a disaster that requires rapid personal evacuation. While “automobile dependence” was once considered negative, we now see the car as a tool of survival in an emergency and we better understand the outcome of “transit dependence” in terms of essentially being selected to be left behind in a mass evacuation.

Two large questions remain. How well are we planning for the next disaster and how well are we putting new information about emergency planning and safety into the hands of people with disabilities? Hurricanes allow more time for preparation. Man-made disasters do not. Despite the days of warning by the weather service, many people with disabilities who did not have personal transportation were left behind as those with automobiles fled. That government sponsored evacuation did not occur as numerous buses stood idle, and that relief was weeks in coming all reflect problems of infrastructure and planning. Cities and the people with disabilities who live in them must address these concerns. Transportation must be a large part of the discussion.
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