

Research Update: MIT AgeLab and The Hartford's Work on Planning for Natural Disasters and Alzheimer's Disease

Natural disasters can happen anywhere. The types of disasters and their effects may differ – the impact of a wildfire may be different than that of a blizzard, an ice storm or a tornado – but 75% of Americans are at risk for some type of natural disaster. Some people, such as older adults, however, may be more affected than others. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) AgeLab (web.mit.edu/agelab), in Cambridge, MA, began doing research last year with The Hartford's Advance 50 Team (www.thehartford.com) on how older adults prepare for natural disasters. One of the observations the researchers made from this work was that people in some situations face more challenges in planning for and preparing for natural disasters than others. In particular, caregivers of someone with Alzheimer's disease contend with all of the issues around planning and preparing for the disaster itself – putting a safety plan together, making preparations to survive a disaster and seeking shelter as appropriate – in addition to the charge of caring for someone who may not know or understand what is happening, and who may be confused, upset or uncooperative in the moment.

In order to learn more about the particular concerns family care providers of someone with Alzheimer's disease or another dementia had around preparing for natural disasters, the MIT AgeLab and The Hartford Advance 50 research team conducted focus groups with family caregivers in St. Louis, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina. The discussions researchers had with family care providers included what families currently did to prepare for different kinds of natural disasters, and what kinds of information they wanted. As Cynthia Hellyar, Corporate Gerontologist with The Hartford's Advance 50 Team, commented, "Family care providers were often aware of some of the challenges they faced around preparing to survive and thrive in the wake of natural disasters, but like many Americans, they had not planned exactly what they needed to do in a disaster, nor had they had conversations with family and friends specifically about how they could help in such situations."

Drawing on the focus group discussions, the research team has prepared public education materials that are designed to help caregivers of someone with Alzheimer's disease plan for natural disasters. The new booklet, published and produced by The Hartford, will be available free of charge beginning later this spring. The new brochure builds on existing education materials about planning for natural disasters, also drawing on research by the MIT AgeLab and The Hartford's Advance 50 team. This publication, *It Could Happen to Me: Family Conversations about Disaster Planning*, is also produced and published by The Hartford, and can be downloaded on line or ordered free of charge at www.thehartford.com/talkaboutdisasterplanning.

Lisa D'Ambrosio, Ph.D., research scientist at the MIT AgeLab, said, "We very much appreciate the time family caregivers took to talk with us about their preparations for natural disasters. The challenges they identified and the solutions some of them had developed are ones that we think all caregivers will benefit from knowing about. We believe this research and the public education materials published by The Hartford are another step on the road toward the MIT AgeLab's mission, shared by The Hartford's Advance 50 team, of improving the quality of life for all older adults and those who care for them."