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Program assists disabled in storms

By Michelle L. Start

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When power went out after Hurricane Wilma, Cape Coral resident Linda Crawford was home alone and worried about losing her refrigerated medications.

In the early stages of multiple sclerosis, Crawford had decided to wait out the Oct. 24 storm at home instead of going to a shelter. It was the first hurricane Crawford, 48, who was from Brownsburg, Ind., had ever experienced, and she wasn't sure what to expect.

Before the storm, she'd registered with the Americans with Disabilities Act Advisory Board of Southwest Florida hurricane and disaster program.

The registration allows the agency to track those with disabilities after a storm and see if they need help.

"They called me right after Wilma," Crawford said. "They just verified that I was OK and didn't need anything."

She said the call, which came just before power came back on, made her feel like she wasn't alone.

Launched 18 months ago, the North Fort Myers-based program may take on statewide and even national significance.

Linda Carter, chairperson of the advisory board, has

HOW TO REGISTER

- [Visit the Web site](#) and complete the form.
- Call Linda Carter at 368-6846 to request a registration form.

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No Person Left Behind would operate in conjunction with local special needs shelters during hurricane evacuation. Officials said the shelters are typically not very accessible to the disabled.

For instance, Geiger said her husband, who is blind, refuses to stay in a shelter because he would have trouble learning the route to the restroom and his wife would not be able to accompany him inside. Instead, they evacuated to hotels in Central Florida.

In the past, there also have been some problems when families with autistic children have been evacuated to shelters, officials said.

The system also would be able to track evacuees around the country so there would not be anyone left unaccounted for, which was the case in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Carter said.

Marylou Tuckwiller, executive director for Visually Impaired Persons of Southwest Florida, said the registration forms will help local officials plan prior to a storm and give them an idea of any special accommodations that might need to be made.

“Right now the most important part, while we have memories of whispering winds and falling trees, is to get people with disabilities to accept how vulnerable they are and how important it is to plan,” she said.

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