

Allegheny County Health Department

How to Communicate During a Disaster

When disaster strikes, you want to be able to communicate by both receiving and distributing information to others. You may need to call 9-1-1 for assistance, locate friends or family, or let loved ones know that you are okay. During disasters, communications networks could be damaged, lose power, or become congested. This fact sheet provides two important sets of tips. The first will help you prepare your home and mobile devices for a disaster. The second may help you communicate more effectively during and immediately after a disaster.

Before a Disaster: How to Prepare Your Home and Mobile Device

1. Maintain a list of emergency phone numbers in your cell phone and in or near your home phone.
2. Keep charged batteries and car-phone chargers available for back-up power for your cell phone.
3. If you have a traditional landline (non-broadband or VOIP) phone, keep at least one non-cordless phone in your home because it will work even if you lose power.
4. Prepare a family contact sheet. This should include at least one out-of-town contact that may be better able to reach family members in an emergency.
5. Program "In Case of Emergency" (ICE) contacts into your cell phone so emergency personnel can contact those people for you if you are unable to use your phone. Let your ICE contacts know that they are programmed into your phone and inform them of any medical issues or other special needs you may have.
6. If you are evacuated and have call-forwarding on your home phone, forward your home phone number to your cell phone number.
7. If you do not have a cell phone, keep a prepaid phone card to use if needed during or after a disaster.
8. Have a battery-powered radio or television available (with spare batteries).
9. Subscribe to text alert services from local or state governments to receive alerts in the event of a disaster. Parents should sign up for their school district emergency alert system.

During and After a Disaster: How to Reach Friends, Loved Ones & Emergency Services

1. If you have a life-threatening emergency, call 9-1-1. Remember that you cannot currently text 9-1-1. If you are not experiencing an emergency, do not call 9-1-1. If your area offers 3-1-1 service or another information system, call that number for non-emergencies.
2. For non-emergency communications, use text messaging, e-mail, or social media instead of making voice calls on your cell phone to avoid tying up voice networks.

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Data-based services like texts and emails are less likely to experience network congestion. You can also use social media to post your status to let family and friends know you are okay. In addition to Facebook and Twitter, you can use resources such as the American Red Cross's Safe and Well program (www.redcross.org/safeandwell).

3. Keep all phone calls brief. If you need to use a phone, try to convey only vital information to emergency personnel and/or family.
4. If you are unsuccessful in completing a call using your cell phone, wait ten seconds before redialing to help reduce network congestion.
5. Conserve your cell phone battery by reducing the brightness of your screen, placing your phone in airplane mode, and closing apps you are not using that draw power, unless you need to use the phone.
6. If you lose power, you can charge your cell phone in your car. Just be sure your car is in a well-ventilated place (remove it from the garage) and do not go to your car until any danger has passed. You can also listen to your car radio for important news alerts.
7. Tune into broadcast television and radio for important news alerts. If applicable, be sure that you know how to activate the closed captioning or video description on your television.
8. If you do not have a hands-free device in your car, stop driving or pull over to the side of the road before making a call. Do not text on a cell phone, talk, or "tweet" without a hands free device while driving.
9. Immediately following a disaster, resist using your mobile device to watch streaming videos, download music or videos, or play video games, all of which can add to network congestion. Limiting use of these services can help potentially life-saving emergency calls get through to 9-1-1.
10. Check www.ready.gov regularly to find other helpful tips for preparing for disasters and other emergencies.

