

Congregational care of vulnerable people in cold weather



The recent extreme cold weather covering much of the United States has brought new meaning to home and congregational

emergency preparation. Power outages in winter are complicated by cold temperatures, and danger of winter emergencies includes higher risk for home fires from candles and unsafe fireplaces, carbon monoxide poisoning from generators, and outdoor heating appliances brought into unventilated areas and used.

Suggestions for ways that congregations can help are found below:

Caring for people in cold weather

Extremely cold weather makes life more difficult for people who are vulnerable because of chronic health conditions, people who are on fixed incomes, frail people, poor people who live in housing that is drafty and poorly insulated and homeless people and animals who live out doors.

If you know someone in one of the categories listed above, as a minimum, check on them routinely during the harsh weather. Check on them in person since someone might hesitate to reveal their situation.

Here are some suggestions for congregational care groups or individuals who wish help:

1. Provide ride services for people who typically walk or use public transportation that might require a long wait in the cold.
2. Organize groups to go to homes and clear walks and outdoor steps of ice and snow. Be certain that areas around church buildings are clear as well.
3. Rising energy costs will cause some people who are on fixed incomes to try to conserve heat and keep energy bills lower. Use of alternative heating such as space heaters and fireplaces can increase risk of fire. Evaluate the safety of space heaters and arrange for professional assessment of fireplaces - this can prevent injury or death.

NOTE: See the warning about carbon monoxide poisoning that can be printed for newsletters, bulletins, & around buildings.

4. Help those who are eligible for energy assistance submit applications by providing transportation or by letting them know that such programs are available.
5. If you have a visitation team, try to make certain everyone you visit gets a hot meal.
6. Help people who have mobility issues care for pets during extremely cold weather. This is a great way to involve young people in congregational care.
7. Assist with grocery shopping, trips to pharmacies and health care providers when travel is hazardous but make certain that drivers are skilled in navigating snow and ice covered roads and streets.
8. Stop by to visit those who cannot engage in their typical social activities due to the inclement weather.
9. Open a winter clothing bank through the church for those who do not have adequate cold weather clothing.

These just may be a few among the many needs of your congregation and community. Think about the individual needs of people you know and be creative as you show concern for others.

Warning about carbon monoxide.

A high number of power outages can cause families to use alternative heating sources, increasing the possibility for exposure to dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.

Items such as portable generators, propane gas stoves and ovens heated with gasoline have all been used as heat sources indoors, which can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning. Do not use these items to heat your home.

If you experience symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning — headache, nausea, vomiting and fatigue — seek immediate medical attention.

Become familiar with your local poison control center and make a record of their hotline number — before an emergency!