

Q&A

Group offers kits to get seniors 'Safely Out'

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Displacing thousands, Hurricane Sandy left a trail of destruction and death in its wake in New Jersey, New York and other Eastern states, which are beginning the long, slow recovery process.

For Gary Dietrich, the superstorm was a reminder of the importance of helping the vulnerable, particularly the frail elderly, prepare for natural disasters. Dietrich is a Sacramento nonpartisan political analyst and president of Citizen Voice, a nonprofit. One of its projects is Safely Out, which has provided more than 100,000 kits to help Californians prepare for disasters.

Along with checklists and an airtight bag for medications, the \$10 kit includes a front-door hanger that helps alert neighbors and rescuers about the residents' status. The red side is labeled "Need Help," and the green side is labeled "Safely Out."

What can older adults do ahead of time to prepare for disasters?

I have an 87-year-old mother who lives a few miles from the San Andreas Fault. The first thing is, you give them a little reassurance. This is scary stuff. We have to give them some reason not to freak out during the disaster.

These things are frightening to all of us, but older folks already feel vulnerable.

The second thing is to put into place a practical set of tools as soon as possible. Most important are the helpers. Some

older people may need help getting to safety from people who are able-bodied and lucid enough to do it.

My goal is to get them to shelter. Having no power and contaminated water is not going to be good for somebody who's frail and elderly.

How did you come up with the idea for Safely Out?

Like the rest of us, I saw the horrific pictures on TV of Katrina in 2005. It's the biggest disaster in American history. I got the Red Cross to put me through volunteer training, and in less than a week I was boots on the ground in the gulf region.

I came back with expertise. I thought, "We've got to be able to do something for the vulnerable."

On the first anniversary of Katrina, we launched Safely Out.

Californians deal primarily with earthquakes and wildfires – but people in other parts of the country deal with natural disasters, too. Are there plans to take Safely Out national?

Our goal is to distribute 10 million Safely Out kits across the country, and we have member companies in different regions that will do that.

By the end of the year, the kits will be shipped all over the country. And people can order them online through www.citizenvoice.org.

Call The Bee's Anita Creamer,
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