



# ATPM Member Spotlight

## Research Project Highlight

**“I have Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis and use a wheel chair. We had a bomb threat at work, which was very scary. Everyone evacuated, but I was still left on the 3rd floor by the stairwell for the firefighters to come get me. But, no one came. Finally, I just struggled, and I used pure fear to get myself down the stairs and outside. It was scary just to realize that there are not really any procedures in place to help someone like me in an emergency.”**

—From the Nobody Left Behind (NLB) consumer on-line survey

The research project titled, “Nobody Left Behind (NLB): Preparedness for Persons with Mobility Impairments,” began in 2002 in response to the lack of empirical data on the safe, efficient evacuation of people with disabilities in disaster planning. The media coverage of September 11<sup>th</sup> brought evacuation issues to the forefront by the reports of people with disabilities being left behind and perishing as a result.



research is examining through phone surveys and review of local emergency management plans whether local emergency management plans, guidelines, and procedures address the needs of persons with mobility impairments. In addition, the investigators are determining if there are any emerging “best practices” being followed to assist with the safety, survival, and health of persons with mobility impairments during disasters and emergencies.

For purposes of this research, a person with mobility impairment is defined as someone who has moderate to complete difficulty in walking or moving around using equipment. The preliminary results of the study were presented in 2004 at the first Conference on Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities, supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security with the National Organization on Disability.

The findings indicate that few county emergency



Tad Atlander/Journal-World Photo

Glen White with disaster professionals.

**“Today there is more emphasis on animals in a disaster than disabilities. I hate to say it!”**

—From Emergency Manager, NLB Study

The research team of Jennifer Rowland, research associate, and Catherine “Cat” Rooney, project coordinator—under the direction of investigators **Glen W. White, PhD** and Michael H. Fox, at the University of Kansas’ Research and Training Center on Independent Living—are investigating 30 randomly selected U.S. counties, cities, parishes, and boroughs where a natural or man-made disaster occurred between 1998 and 2003 to determine the state of preparedness at local levels for people with mobility impairments. Specifically, the

managers (only 27%) have taken the Emergency Planning and Special Needs course that addresses the needs of persons with disabilities by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, even though most thought it could be helpful. There is little to no representation of persons with disabilities during the development or amendments of the local emergency preparedness plan. Another discovery was that county or site-level surveillance efforts to identify people with mobility impairments both before and after disasters are generally weak among the 43%

who actually use such information for planning and service delivery. In addition, only 20% of emergency managers reported having specific guidelines in place to assist people with mobility impairments during emergencies. Among the 80% who did not have specific guidelines, virtually all thought having guidelines was important.

The project included an on-line consumer survey that was administered from the study's website, [www.nobodyleftbehind2.org](http://www.nobodyleftbehind2.org). Many personal descriptions of the circumstances that people with mobility impairments found themselves in during a disaster or emergency, like the opening statement, are powerful reflections of the shortcomings in many local emergency management and response systems in the United States.

Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act

**"I waited on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor for 4 hours for the fireman to come and carry me down [with my wheel chair] even when the fire was out, but there was a lot of smoke. Now, I recommend that every floor have an evacuation chair. ... I fear being left behind in a stairwell because no one knew what else to do."**

*—Work fire caused by bomb, NLB study*

(ADA) being in existence for 15 years, survey participants reported that disaster-related or local services are still inaccessible and disaster-related personnel uninformed of the needs and ways to assist persons with disabilities. They also found themselves in public places during an emergency or disaster and being left behind while others were escaping to safety. Other frightening, and sometimes life-threatening situations occur when infrastructures fail, particularly during long-term power outages. Disaster recovery efforts for persons with disabilities are often not seen as a priority of others involved. Thus, placing persons with mobility impairments at risk of losing their independence, mobility, and health.

Over the last three years, the NLB research investigators have not missed a chance to present this information at national and regional meetings and to work with experts in the field to formulate strategies to address the issues with disaster planning, evacuation, sheltering, and after disaster recovery efforts for persons with mobility impairments; and these messages are being heard and making the headlines. Another highlight of these

presentations was receiving the No. 1 poster ranking at the 2003 American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Psychologists and Social Workers conference.

Currently, the next levels of the project are to

**"[Disaster personnel] did not know whether any of the options were wheelchair accessible or if they had electricity to keep my ventilators running and the batteries charged if the power outage lasted beyond my ventilators battery life."**

*—Earthquake survivor, NLB study*

issue recommendations based on the merging "best practices" for modifying federal and local disaster and emergency systems, and to continue with educating and strategizing with disability groups, emergency managers and first responders, health professionals, community based organizations, and other disaster and emergency agencies on how to assure that... Nobody Is Left Behind.

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