

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, STASH A SURVIVAL KIT

Immediate government aid not likely

Supplies should last at least 3 days

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If a disaster like Hurricane Katrina hit Toronto, would you and your family be ready?

Think back to a year ago when New Orleans residents were stranded in their homes, on high ground and the Superdome without food, water and essential medicines like insulin for diabetics. One of the biggest lessons Ontario learned from Katrina is that citizens can't necessarily count on government and relief organizations for immediate help in disasters, especially big ones.

"We're trying to instil in the public their own sense of responsibility for surviving," says Emergency Management Commissioner Julian Fantino.

"People should be prepared to look after themselves for at least three days. In New Orleans, people were left to their own devices for a long time."

There may be no running water, no electricity — nothing.

That makes it a good idea to prepare a home survival kit, including:

- At least four litres of water per person per day, half for drinking and half for personal hygiene and dish washing.
- Canned food such as stews, soups, meats, fish, vegetables and fruit. And a can opener.
- Ready-to-eat foods that don't require refrigeration such as crackers, honey, peanut butter.
- Disposable plates, cutlery and cups, a pocket knife, flashlight and batteries, radio, first-aid kit, waterproof matches, toilet paper, clothing and footwear needed for the season.

But experts are under no illusions that most houses have such a kit, further details of which are available on the website of Emergency Management Ontario.

"Very, very few Canadians do it," says John Saunders, director of disaster management in Ontario for the Canadian Red Cross. "People don't like to think about bad stuff happening. It's human nature."

But bad stuff does happen.

Just weeks ago, tornadoes tore through cottage country, causing lengthy power blackouts. There was the big blackout of August 2003, when thousands were stranded by the lack of subway service, among other problems. An ice storm paralyzed eastern Ontario and Quebec in 1998. In 1978, there was the Mississauga train derailment evacuation. And always, there is the memory of killer Hurricane Hazel that hit Toronto in 1954.

There are even warning signs in relatively minor inconveniences, like the Friday evening CN freight train rush-hour derailment in mid-July near the westend Mimico GO Station that forced 65,000 commuters to find alternate ways home.

"If that had been a train car carrying chlorine gas that could have been a huge evacuation," says Saunders.

"Ontario is ripe," he adds. "About 40 per cent of chemicals manufactured in Canada are transported through Ontario."

Another lesson from Katrina was to be prepared for the unexpected, be it from Mother Nature, an accident or terrorism.

"No matter how much you plan and how much work you put into being prepared, there are circumstances that tax you to the limit," says Fantino. "You're never finished preparing."

In Ontario, it's expected most disasters would be related to the weather, but there's also the possibility of flu pandemics, nuclear accidents, northern forest fires and blackouts.

Chances are, if anything big happens, no one agency will be able to handle it all. That's why Fantino has been building contacts with the military, Red Cross and other groups that can provide assistance.

"In Katrina it seems when things finally started going right was when the military intervened," the former Toronto police chief says, hinting at another lesson learned — making good decisions early, and not letting the situation get out of hand, as happened in New Orleans.

"It takes a lot longer to right something that's off the rails if you don't get going right away," says Fantino. "You need one-stop shopping when it comes to making major decisions."

Help on that front has come from new emergency management legislation that some civil libertarians have warned will give sweeping powers to Premier Dalton McGuinty's cabinet to override existing legal protections. Fantino calls it a "streamlining" of the decision-making process.

For the Red Cross, Saunders said Katrina impressed upon him the need to have more volunteers and disaster relief supplies such as blankets pre-positioned around the province.