

December 26, 2005

**Section:** Metro

**Edition:** Fort Myers

**Page:** B1, B2

## **Program assists disabled in storms**

*Michelle L. Start*

*Staff*

By MICHELLE L. START

[mstart@news-press.com](mailto:mstart@news-press.com)

When power went out after Hurricane Wilma, Cape Coral resident Linda Crawford was home alone and worried about losing her refrigerated medications.

In the early stages of multiple sclerosis, Crawford had decided to wait out the Oct. 24 storm at home instead of going to a shelter. It was the first hurricane Crawford, 48, who was from Brownsburg, Ind., had ever experienced, and she wasn't sure what to expect.

Before the storm, she'd registered with the Americans with Disabilities Act Advisory Board of Southwest Florida hurricane and disaster program.

The registration allows the agency to track those with disabilities after a storm and see if they need help.

"They called me right after Wilma," Crawford said. "They just verified that I was OK and didn't need anything."

She said the call, which came just before power came back on, made her feel like she wasn't alone.

Launched 18 months ago, the North Fort Myers-based program may take on statewide and even national significance.

Linda Carter, chairperson of the advisory board, has been pushing the program that she calls "No Person Left Behind" for a decade. But she finally got it up and running right before Hurricane Charley struck Southwest Florida in August 2004.

"It's a very simple registration form," she said. "It lists everything we need to know about our people with disabilities."

A total of 100 people have filled out the registration forms, but Carter is hoping to register all of Lee County's estimated 90,000 disabled residents. But she would need more volunteers to man telephone lines and resource centers after storms.

After Wilma, volunteers worked out of the north Fort Myers office of Visually Impaired Persons of Southwest Florida, calling to check on those who had registered.

The Lee County Parks and Recreation Department partnered with Carter's program during Wilma, setting up charge stations for motorized wheelchairs and scooters.

If the program grows, Carter would like to set up an independent office with an automated computer system to make the calls and offer a menu of services. She said the program could be used year-round for educational purpose.

Over the past several months, Carter has met with Lee County commissioners, businesses and city leaders in an effort to raise funds and obtain the necessary services.

After seeing disabled people stranded in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Carter began speaking with legislators about taking the program statewide. She estimates creating such a program would cost \$5 million.

Earlier this week, when Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin proposed a bill to create federal funding for emergency preparedness and response for disabled people, Carter called his office to talk about her program and asked to be the national pilot.

"Hurricane Katrina's aftermath has shown us that we need to have a better emergency response plan, especially one that includes preparations for assisting people with disabilities," Harkin said in a press release. "This bill is an important step to ensure that the needs of disabled Americans will be addressed in case of an emergency."

His plan includes determining the needs of disabled people, developing first-responder training, setting up telephone hot lines and Web sites with evacuation information and providing guidance about the rights of disabled people regarding post-storm evacuation and relocation.

Each is an issue Carter and others locally have been working on for some time.

"We lump people with disabilities into one group, and within that group you have people with varying needs," said Marian Geiger, secretary of the board of directors for Visually Impaired Persons of Southwest Florida. "When you start a project like this and want it to be accessible and useful to every disabilities group, it's not an easy undertaking."

No Person Left Behind would operate in conjunction with local special needs shelters during hurricane evacuation. Officials said the shelters are typically not very accessible to the disabled.

For instance, Geiger said her husband, who is blind, refuses to stay in a shelter because he would have trouble learning the route to the restroom and his wife would not be able to accompany him inside. Instead, they evacuated to hotels in Central Florida.

In the past, there also have been some problems when families with autistic children have been evacuated to shelters, officials said.

The system also would be able to track evacuees around the country so there would not be anyone left unaccounted for, which was the case in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Carter said.

Marylou Tuckwiller, executive director for Visually Impaired Persons of Southwest Florida, said the registration forms will help local officials plan prior to a storm and give them an idea of any special accommodations that might need to be made.

"Right now the most important part, while we have memories of whispering winds and falling trees, is to get people with disabilities to accept how vulnerable they are and how important it is to plan," she said.

How to register

Go online to [www.nopersonleftbehind.org](http://www.nopersonleftbehind.org) and complete the form or Call Linda Carter at 368-6846 to request a registration form.

---

Copyright (c) The News-Press. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.