



Preparation for those whose job to care

BY ANGELA WILLIAMS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 03/16/20 04:30 PM EDT
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In an Oval Office address on Wednesday night, President [Donald Trump](#) unveiled several policy measures to help tackle the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak in the United States. The president acknowledged the depth of the outbreak by citing the World Health Organization's (WHO) [declaration that it's now officially a worldwide pandemic](#). The WHO has also said that it expects the number of cases, deaths and affected countries to climb even higher in the days and weeks ahead. Once a pandemic is declared, it acknowledges that community transfers are happening, and governments and health care providers need to ensure they are prepared.

When a crisis occurs, caregivers are among those hit the hardest. It has been widely reported that in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak in China, caregivers were more likely than any other group to become infected. As a critical part of the health care infrastructure, particularly at community and individual levels, their unique potential contribution to pandemic preparedness cannot be overstated.

[One in four Americans lives with a disability](#), and many people with disabilities face heightened risks if caregivers are unable to perform their critically needed services. It is our responsibility to give caregivers the necessary counsel in order to protect themselves so they can protect those for whom they care.

A helpful way to understand the need for preparedness is to view the situation through the prism of a category five hurricane. We know the hurricane exists, we are sure it's going to eventually hit, and we know we need to take all necessary precautions in order to efficiently prepare. Those in the path are well aware of the steps they must take ahead of

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time. The same holds true for caregivers in a pandemic situation, but no such checklist exists to safeguard both them and the ones they care for.

Increasing efforts to support caregivers will result in equipping our communities with the tools they need to address this and any potential future crises. We encourage caregivers to take the following immediate actions:

- **Consider Incorporating a Telehealth Care Model.** In many cases, those who rely on direct care professionals may have friends or family nearby who can provide temporary intervention. As a skilled direct care professional, your expertise can still be delivered through virtual collaboration with those who are present. Engage now with those who can act as your proxy and ensure that you have the technology in place to continue providing services even while travel or quarantine policies are in flux.
- **Coordinate with Healthcare Providers.** Many people who require caregiver support have routine medical needs that should be addressed immediately. Traditional supply chains have been disrupted and quarantines may cause even further challenges. Caregivers should focus on stocking up on critical-need supplies such as medications, medical devices and personal protective equipment, ensuring that those in their care are prepared.
- **Create a Communication Plan.** Disruption in direct care can leave those who rely on caregivers confused and anxious, potentially exacerbating other issues. Caregivers should diffuse the stress by preparing, to the best of their ability, a plan to communicate the potential eventualities and the steps that will be taken should they occur.

Public policymakers must pay attention and assure that caregivers are able to do their jobs purposefully and safely. This will only happen with unwavering bipartisan support for the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#) in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. A passing vote would provide free coronavirus testing, paid emergency medical leave, extended unemployment insurance, food assistance and help for health care workers.

With the number of infections and death toll rising daily, it's too soon to draw solid conclusions about how this will play out. However, if examined collaboratively across the disability and caregiver sector, common-sense caregiver preparedness represents perhaps the most effective means of improving ongoing community-level, pandemic resilience. To prepare caregivers for pandemic situations is to create community-level resilience for future generations.

Angela Williams is president and CEO of Easterseals, a leading provider of services for people with disabilities, veterans and seniors.

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