

Op-ed: Seniors should stay prepared for winter storms

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The slew of storms this winter reminds us how important it is to stay safe when dangerous weather strikes. For older adults, the calm weather between storms is the perfect time to prepare and put a plan in place.

How can we prepare? If older loved ones live on their own, rather than in a senior living community, take time to consider how to handle various scenarios. For example, what if they're home alone during an extended power outage? How will they communicate with family members or emergency personnel if the phone service goes out? Winter storms can pose a significant threat to seniors living in isolation, even if they are used to maintaining an independent lifestyle.

Be on alert. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security advises that everyone should monitor radio or TV reports about the situation in their area. Stay tuned in to your local emergency station and monitor reports and mobile alert warnings about

situation in their area. Stay tuned in to your local emergency station and monitor reports and mobile-alert warnings about severe weather updates.

If your loved ones live on their own, they need to take measures to keep their home safe and warm. Determine a plan for restocking groceries and medication should the roads be impassable for several days. Consider whether they can remove snow from the driveway or if they'll need assistance. Matters can get worse if older adults attempt to dig themselves out. Nearly 70 percent of Americans over age 60 have been diagnosed with some form of cardiovascular disease. Cold temperatures can constrict already narrowed blood vessels and increase the risk for heart attack and stroke if they shovel snow.

Assemble an emergency kit. By preparing a kit in advance, you can ensure having all essential items together for sheltering in place or evacuating if necessary. Consider the following items:

Several days' worth of bottled water, medications and non-perishable foods.

A battery-powered radio, flashlight and extra batteries.

A first aid kit.

An adequate supply of blankets in case the heat goes out.

Cash and copies of important documents, such as medical insurance cards.

Hygiene items, including contact lens solution, toothpaste and toothbrush.

An extra set of keys to home and car.

Any required medical devices, along with chargers and batteries.

As executive director of a Stamford-area senior living community, it's my mission every day to ease the challenges faced by older adults. Preparing for winter storms requires a significant investment of time, money and effort. Seniors may want to consider making a moving to a maintenance-free senior living community where they can feel confident that, when disaster strikes, their needs are met.

The winter season allows us to reflect and consider whether our parents or other loved ones are in an environment where they can live as independently and happily as possible. Next time you visit your mom and dad, use the opportunity to ask if they still want the responsibilities of maintaining a home. During that talk, be on the lookout for signs that their needs may be better met living with others. Be sure to empathize with their feelings about maintaining their independence, but also remind them they have options to live a healthier, stress-free life in retirement.

Winter weather poses serious risks for our older neighbors and aging parents. This is true even for seniors who generally thrive while living independently. When the next storm strikes, will you – and they – be ready?

Christopher Barstein is executive director at Edgehill Community, a Benchmark Senior Living Community in Stamford.