



Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response

Atlantis Community Inc. Strengthens Disaster Response through Intentional Partnerships

Atlantis Community, a Center for Independent Living based in Denver, Colorado that serves a seven-county catchment area, leveraged its Information and Referral/Assistance program during the COVID-19 pandemic to serve as an anchor point for responding to the needs of community members, engaging with new and existing partners, and creating new programs to provide resources and services during the public health emergency.

Background

As for many organizations within aging and disabilities networks, the COVID-19 pandemic was the impetus for Atlantis Community to rapidly implement emergency response programs and strategies to address the needs of people with disabilities and their communities. The organization benefited from a renewed focus on emergency preparedness that occurred just prior to the pandemic. Due to threats posed by climate change and other hazards, Atlantis faced an increasing need for disaster readiness and expertise. Wanting a dedicated staff person who understood the nuances of disaster preparedness for an organization serving all people with disabilities, Atlantis brought on a new staff member in the position of Disaster Preparedness Coordinator just in time for the unprecedented public health emergency stemming from COVID-19.

At the onset of the pandemic, Atlantis' Information and Referral/Assistance (I&R/A) service was flooded with calls and emails

from consumers and community members seeking services and supports in the context of the many unknowns resulting from a new coronavirus. The scope of impact on consumers called for a collaborative response that engaged existing and new partners.

Implementation

With call volume spiking, Atlantis quickly developed a response team that put together a community survey to identify the most pressing needs of people with disabilities in its service area. The response team, led by the Disaster Preparedness Coordinator, included the organization's leadership, program directors, and grants and contracts coordinator.

The community survey indicated that needs were most prevalent in the areas of food access, communication and technology, social isolation, and mitigating individual risk. To develop resources for identified

needs, Atlantis fostered a network of existing and new partners to collectively respond to the public health emergency using the organization's I&R/A program as an anchor point. While pandemic response was the immediate charge of this network of partners, the network offers a mechanism to strengthen response to other types of disaster situations as well.

The network of community partners collaborated to create programs that would provide people with disabilities with needed resources and supports. Programs were developed to help address access to food, technology, vaccine information, shelter-in-place kits, and personal protective equipment as well as providing emergency transition services for individuals with disabilities in congregate settings.

For example, technology-related programming provided individuals experiencing low access to technology with vouchers for both devices and connectivity to enable individuals to connect to virtual appointments, community events, and family gatherings.

Atlantis' Independent Living team, with training from the Disaster Preparedness Coordinator, worked one-on-one with I&R/A callers to help individuals connect to the new programs and resources. Emergency response funding supported these efforts. Funding from the CARES Act, the American Rescue Plan Act, and other federal, state, and local funding facilitated program implementation.

A Network of Partners Addressing Community Needs

Vaccine Clinic Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy Denver, vaccine clinic coordination • Colorado Cross Disability Coalition, initial project coordination and vaccine clinic coordination • Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, vaccine clinic coordination • Denver Department of Public Health and Environment, vaccine clinic coordination • Denver Health, vaccine clinic coordination • Groundwork Denver, vaccine clinic coordination • Joy As Resistance, vaccine clinic coordination • New Era Colorado, vaccine clinic coordination • One Colorado, vaccine clinic coordination • Redline Gallery, vaccine clinic coordination
Support for Emergency Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American Furniture Warehouse, household setup items for emergency transition consumers • ARC Thrift, household setup items for emergency transition consumers • Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing, expedited eligibility support for HCBS for emergency transition consumers • Colorado Division of Housing, state-funded housing vouchers for emergency transition program • Rocky Mountain Human Services, HCBS service brokering support for emergency transition program • Target, household setup items for emergency transition program • The Reciprocity Collective, outreach and employment support for emergency transition program
Food Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Café 180, food boxes for food access program • GrowHaus, food boxes for food access program
Technology Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PCs for People, access to technology for technology access program

After Action

While the pandemic created many challenges for aging and disabilities network agencies, Atlantis also experienced valuable outcomes, and unintended benefits, from rallying a network of partners to meet the pressing needs of community members. Through its efforts, Atlantis demonstrated its place and role as a valued resource for people with disabilities during an emergency or disaster. The organization has seen an increase in I&R/A calls in general and a renewed sense of trust on the part of consumers that Atlantis is a source of reliable information.

Benefits have not only been external but also internal to the organization. For example, all staff are now trained to answer I&R/A calls so that the organization is better able to support an influx of calls in the event of an emergency or disaster situation. Additionally, staff have been provided with training on compassion fatigue, recognizing the impact of heavy caseloads over the past few years. Staff training has also strengthened skills in benefits application assistance so that consumers can be more effectively connected to needed programs.

Lessons from responding to the pandemic and other emergencies are informing service approaches going forward. For instance, Atlantis has seen a renewed interest in disaster preparedness planning from consumers. In response, the organization is developing a disaster preparedness/planning peer support workshop. This workshop model will aim to support consumers in completing a personal emergency plan. Atlantis will also seek to provide participants with basic items for a starter emergency go bag. Additionally, the organization implemented a texting service at the end of 2020 to improve capacity to rapidly send out notifications to consumers or staff.

The texting service, hosted on a web-based platform, can send messages to several groups: 1) consumers (for example, to report office closures); 2) staff (for notifications and alerts about safety such as active shooter situations); and 3) consumers and staff (emergency and disaster alerts). Text notifications can supplement information shared through I&R/A calls before, during, and after an event.

Partnerships have been central to Atlantis' pandemic response efforts. Existing partnerships were strengthened and solidified while new partnerships were established. As a result, Atlantis is better connected with a variety of community partners and has expanded its concept of 'partner.' An important focus for Atlantis moving forward is being intentional about maintaining partnerships so that these relationships can be effectively leveraged if and when there is an increase in community needs. Staying connected with partners is important to maintaining relationships. Atlantis, for example, uses its social media and newsletter to continue partner engagement.

The organization also seeks opportunities to have a seat at the table to help bring an understanding of the needs of people with disabilities in disasters and emergencies to emergency management. In one example, Atlantis is partnering with the Access and Functional Needs Committee run by the Colorado Office of Emergency Management. Atlantis is also using data from its pandemic response programs to inform state-level long-term services and supports programming in areas such as diversion and transition. For Atlantis, the sustainability of effective disaster response practices calls for a comprehensive approach that includes partnerships, funding resources, advocacy, and embedding lessons learned in ongoing programs and policies.

Visit Atlantis Community Inc. at:
<https://atlantiscommunity.org/>

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