ADA Live!
EPISODE 32: EQUAL ACCESS IN EMERGENCIES: DURING AND AFTER

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Presenters: Christy Dunaway, president of Dunaway Consulting
Host: Sally Weiss, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Welcome to WADA ADA Live Talk Radio, brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here’s your host.

SALLY WEISS: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA ADA Live!. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 32nd episode of ADA Live!. My name is Sally Weiss and I'm Director of Knowledge Translation for the Southeast ADA Center. Our guest today is Christy Dunaway, President of Dunaway Consulting, and also my colleague at the Southeast ADA Center. Prior to realizing her and her late husband's dream of starting their own business, Christy was executive director of LIFE of Mississippi for fourteen years. Life of Mississippi is also the state affiliate for the Southeast ADA Center. Our topic today is equal access in emergencies. ADA Live! listening audience, you can submit questions about this or any of our other ADA Live! programs at any time on ADAlive.org. Christy, welcome to our show.

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Thank you, I'm glad to be here. I appreciate the opportunity.

SALLY WEISS: Christy, I understand that you’ve been asked by MEMA to serve as their disability integration advisor. My first question, what does MEMA stand for?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Mississippi Emergency Management Agency.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you. What are your responsibilities for MEMA?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Well, we started out with the plan for me to do accessibility surveys of pre selected disaster recovery center locations. So each county in the state
of Mississippi has an emergency manager and we were going to ask those emergency managers to preselect three locations in their county that could be used as disaster recovery centers in the event of a disaster. And my plan still is to go out and do accessibility surveys of those locations and let them know if they meet the requirements, and if not, what would need to be done to make changes or modification to the building or the location. And if it's too difficult to do or not cost effective, then they would go out and seek yet another location. So that's the original plan. As soon as I sign the contract however, we had a federally declared emergency with flooding. So it's changed a little bit. I'm doing a lot of technical assistance within the organization. Training and just teaching people on the job about disability related services that are available in the state. Where we can find assistance for individuals with disabilities who have been impacted. And I've been working very closely with the Federal Emergency Management Agency Support Staff who are here in the state to support us in the flooding.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you. Can you tell us what's involved in conducting an accessibility survey of a disaster recovery center or DRC in the event that you ever get a chance to do this?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Sure. I have actually surveyed several. We've done seven so far. They were not necessarily pre planned or planned out. These were locations that were selected rather quickly when we realize that had we were going to receive the federal declaration. So I have gone out and done seven accessibility surveys.

What I'm looking for in the event of an emergency when time is of the essence is good function and accessibility enough for an individual with a disability to come into the center, seek the assistance that is available to them, use the bathroom, and be able to access all of the programs and services that may be available in the center.

So what I'm looking for is standard starting in the parking lot. We're looking for parking. Is there good, accessible parking available? Is it well marked? Is there good access up to the front door? Can individuals with disabilities easily enter the front door on their own? Independently? Once they have entered the disaster recovery center, is the flow within the center good? Is there plenty of space between the tables? And organizations that are being represented there, can they get up to the tables to chat with the representatives that are available?

In addition to that, FEMA provides an accessibility communication kit to every disaster recovery center. Those kits are on the truck and they're brought into the center as soon as it's opened. And in some cases the FEMA staff, their disability integration staff, have not made it into the state yet. So I have learned how to set up that accessibility communication kit, make sure that it's all working well and can actually
show others now at the center how it’s used. And it’s come in very handy, quite frankly, for a number of people. Particularly the elderly who are hard of hearing or deaf. And then we look at the bathrooms to make sure that those bathrooms are fully accessible. That there is an accessible stall. That the sinks are at the right height, et cetera. So individuals can use the restroom at that facility should they need to do so. So those are the basic things we are looking for.

SALLY WEISS: Christy, how does this management center differ from an actual shelter?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Well the disaster recovery centers are not shelters, they will open once the state and the federal government have declared a disaster to be a federal disaster and we can seek federal assistance. So shelters are opened immediately either before or during an actual disaster. Shelters are places where people will go and stay overnight or for many nights if necessary and essentially live in shelter during the event of the disaster until they can return home.

The disaster recovery centers on the other hand are usually opened several weeks after a disaster, and it’s not a sheltering situation. You don’t stay. You go in and you seek the assistance from the federal government and the state government that may be available to you through Small Business Administration loans or other resources in the state that can assist someone to recover from the disaster and to try to recover some of their losses. So they’re short term. You’re only usually there in for a couple of hours at most and you’re not spending the night as you would be in a shelter.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you very much for clearing that up. ADA Live! listening audience, you can submit your questions about equal access in emergencies or other ADA Live! programs at any time on ADAlive.org. And now a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: LIFE of Mississippi is the nonprofit center for independent living, created through federal legislation in 1992. LIFE has enhanced the lives of over 35,000 individuals with disabilities since 1993. Building on our strength, we have provided information to more than 170,000 people. We reach all four corners of the state and serve every county. No matter how old you are or where you live in Mississippi, we can help. Our board members and staff live with disabilities. We know what disability means to you. For more information about LIFE or the services we provide, visit our website at www.LIFEofMS.com.

SALLY WEISS: Welcome back. We are talking with Christy Dunaway about ensuring access in all aspects of emergency management for people with disabilities. Christy, where have you been over the past month?
CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Well, this has been an interesting disaster. It's flooding. We had flooding from both the Mississippi river, as well as the Pearl River, which is probably the next largest river that comes through the state. We have had disaster declarations in 17 of the counties. Those counties have been in the delta of the state which most of the counties front the Mississippi River. And we've also had disaster declarations down in the Pine Belt region, which is about a third of the way down the state, a little bit closer to our Gulf Coast in the Hattiesburg area of the state. We have gone from the top of the state almost to the bottom of the state in trying to serve individuals who have been affected by this disaster.

SALLY WEISS: What did you find when you visited these areas?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: When we first started out, we started out in the delta region of the state up in north Mississippi, northwest Mississippi along the Mississippi River. There were still a good bit of flooding actually when we first began going out in these counties. What we were looking for was the disaster recovery centers that had been selected by the emergency management people. We were looking at those locations to determine if they would work for our purposes. It's there's a lot more involved than just the accessibility of it.

FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency is also looking for space to bring their large truck in that provides them with internet access and phone service and things like that and so forth. We also need to make sure it's safe. Is there a local fire department and ambulance service that serves that area? Is there a local hospital and medical clinic. We're looking for a number of different things.

We looked at disaster recovery center locations in five different counties in northwest Mississippi in our delta region. And we opened five disaster recovery centers in those five separate counties up there.

So when I went out to visit the DRCs, some of the problems that we saw when we arrived were the locations are often older, older buildings. And it's because the county emergency management agency is looking for places where is they can do these disaster recovery centers in locations that are not going to cost any money and that no one has to rent or pay for. We're looking at older buildings.

A couple of the problems we found is we didn't see any up right signs marking accessible parking for instance. But the good thing about FEMA is they have such incredible resources. Now they do kind of have a lack of knowledge regarding accessibility. Often when we would walk into a bathroom, I would hear someone say oh, okay, there's grab bars, good. It's good. And I would walk in right behind them and go oh, no, it's not good. Just because there are grab bars does not mean that it's usable.
So I was able to really educate the team that I was with that grab bars are not always the best solution necessarily for accessibility in a bathroom. The stalls need to be wide enough. There needs to be plenty of turnaround space in the stalls. A wheelchair user needs to be able to back up beside that toilet. There needs to be two grab bars as opposed to one. But their spirit was really great. Any time I mentioned an issue, for instance the lack of upright signage for parking spaces, their attitude was no problem, we will make them. We've got the signs in the truck. We just need to get some coffee cans and Quickcrete, and we'll get those up. We need some more grab bars in this bathroom. We have them in the truck, we'll get those put up. Tell us where it needs to be done.

So I found while they had a lack of knowledge about what was really needed, they were more than willing and happy to make the changes that I requested and they had the resources and the means to do so.

**SALLY WEISS:** We're going to pause now for another word from our sponsors.

**VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER:** The Southeast ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training, and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government, and individuals at local, state, and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the ADA National network at 1 800 949 4232.

**SALLY WEISS:** Welcome back. We're talking to Christy Dunaway about accessibility in emergency management centers. Christy, it's been almost 11 years since Hurricane Katrina, what improvements have you seen?

**CHRISTY DUNAWAY:** In the state of Mississippi and, nationally I can say, I also serve as the chairperson for the national council on independent living emergency response subcommittee, speaking from a state level, the improvements that we've seen have been the collaborations between the organizations and the agencies.

When Katrina hit the state of Mississippi 11 years ago, the disability community had not at all been involved in any type of emergency management, not disaster response, management, or recovery. We were not known to emergency managers or first responders. We were unable to assist. We were not allowed to enter shelters because the people running the shelter didn't know us and didn't know who we were. We have changed that in the past 11 years. The collaboration in the state is incredible quite frankly. LIFE of Mississippi particularly, and myself, are quite well known now within the emergency management community in the state. We have been involved and included in task forces that are designing the emergency plan for the
state of Mississippi. We’ve provided training to the Mississippi Medical Corp. and to the Mississippi Emergency Management support staff and have been actively involved in the exercise simulations, overnight shelter stays and things like that.

The disability community is now much more included and integrated into emergency management in the state. So I think that’s going to make a very significant difference in the event of the next major disaster here. We are known. They now look to the disability community as being experts in the field of the provisions of services to people with disabilities in the event of a disaster. So that has been the most important change and the most positive change that we’ve seen since Hurricane Katrina.

There are still some problems obviously. We still have some issues with sheltering. We still have some issues with the safety and security of individuals with disabilities in the event of a disaster. Many people with disabilities would choose to shelter in place as oppose to evacuate because of the major issues they have had in the past with sheltering. Nationally, that is improving some. But whether or not it will translate to Mississippi and whether or not we will be successful in getting people with disabilities to actually evacuate in the event of an emergency, remains to be seen. We hope so. And we can with confidence say to them that things are better. That your needs will be much better met than they would have been 11 years ago and encourage them to evacuate particularly in a mandatory evacuation situation.

In addition, the services, the recovery services that would be provided to folks with disabilities has improved significantly. MEMA now has me on board as a disability integration advisor, and it will be my job to ensure that people with disabilities receive equal access and receive equal treatment and services in the recovery process of a disaster.

SALLY WEISS: Can you talk a little bit about some of the issues that people with disabilities face that made them reluctant originally to go to shelters.

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: Sure. Often shelters were not made very accessible for individuals with disabilities. We understand that in an emergency situation time is of the essence and we understand that many of the agencies and organizations such as Red Cross for instance that are operating these shelters, they're looking for free space, you know, space that they don't have to spend money for to rent. They just had not been well trained. The folks working in the shelters had not been well trained. And people with disabilities were not welcomed quite frankly. Because no one knew how to quote unquote handle them. And so the primary issue for people with disabilities here, for instance in Hurricane Katrina, they didn't want to evacuate. When you have a disability and you live in a home that you have made comfortable for yourself and meets the need of your specific disability, it's very difficult to leave the comfort and the
safety and the accessibility of your home and go to a place where you don't know if it’s going to meet your needs or not.

You don't know if you’re going to be able to go to the bathroom or to take a shower in that location. Or to transfer onto one of those shelter cots. So that's always been the biggest issue is that people with disabilities did not want to evacuate because they didn't know what they didn't know. You know? They don't understand the unknown. And so they had no idea if they would be comfortable in a sheltering situation or not.

That has changed. It has improved. And again, we have gotten the word out to the disability community as best as we can in an effort to assure them that things are better than they were. So that perhaps in the next emergency they will evacuate.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you. How can the disability community and the advocates get more involved?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: You know in Mississippi and nationwide, what I would say is this. People with disabilities, in order for our needs to be understand and our culture, and our philosophy, and our needs to be understood, you’ve got to get involved and you’ve got to become integrated. We always suggest to the disability community, if the emergency management field is not reaching out to you and seeking your suggestions and your guidance, then reach out to them. Ask to be placed on task forces for instance that are designing and developing state emergency plans. Ask to be included in exercise simulations for sheltering or for disaster recovery.

What we've learned over the years is that while sheltering exercises may include disability related issues, they're not including people with disabilities. So you’ve got, you’ve got able bodied people out there with a T shirt on the that says "I am blind" and pretending to be someone with a visual impairment or who is blind. Of course we all know that's not going to work. What we encourage the disability community to do is reach out to your state emergency managers, reach out to your state health departments, and your state departments of human services, and offer to sit at the table with them, to help them design their plans and their services and to be actively involved. It's the surest and safest way to ensure that your needs are going to be met in the event of a disaster.

SALLY WEISS: Christy, how do people find their local DRC? Where would they go to look?

CHRISTY DUNAWAY: So looking for the DRC, it's going to be really pretty obvious. The Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, I'm sure it's the same for the other states, they do a really remarkable job of publicity. They get the word out of where the locations are going to be. They begin doing that as soon as they are opened. That
information goes out over the radio, the internet, the local media will always run that information because they're just as interested in seeing that their local community gets assistance, too. So they have a great public relations team, also known as external affairs. And they do a really great job of getting the information out to the community.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you very much. I appreciate the time you've given us. At this time I would like to thank Christy Dunaway, President of Dunaway Consulting, for joining us today at WADA ADA Live!, and thank you also for our ADA Live! listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support and participation in this series of the WADA ADALive! broadcast. Remember, you may submit questions about any of our ADALive! topics by going to ADAlive.org. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your regional ADA center at 1 800 949 4232. That's 1 800 949 4232. All calls are free and confidential. Join us next month on Wednesday, June 1st at 1 o'clock Eastern for Episode 33 where we will be discussing access to voting. See you next month on WADA ADA Live!

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