

Military OneSource Podcast — How to Prepare for Disasters

Episode transcript:

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce. We'll start off with a light question. Are you prepared for a disaster? OK, maybe not a light question, but we'll try to keep the conversation light because it is a good time to ask the question. Our weather has been wild and dangerous. Floods, fire and storms, and then there are the manmade disasters. There's a lot going on. It's happening at a whole new scale. So, in today's episode, we'll focus on preparing for a disaster.

And returning to the podcast to talk about all this is Lisa Valentine. Lisa, welcome back.

Lisa Valentine:

Thank you very much, Bruce. Glad to be here.

Bruce:

Glad you're here. Lisa is the program manager with Casualty and Mortuary Affairs and Personnel Accountability. The last part of it is going to be the part that we'll be referring to in this conversation. So, Lisa, if you could sort of introduce yourself and talk to us about the Personnel Accountability Program.

Lisa:

Absolutely. So, I've been working personnel accountability for about 10 years, and before that I was in the Army for 23 years. And then even before that, so it goes even ... when I was a child, because I grew up as an Army brat, and being prepared for a natural or manmade disaster was something that I learned about growing up throughout my childhood and adult life.

Bruce:

Wow. Boy Scouts don't get that prepared.

Lisa:

Well, I was a Girl Scout, used to be.

Bruce:

Oh, OK. There we go. Well, that explains a lot. All right, good, good. Well, let's get right into it. We're going to talk about specifically some of the things that you can do, but I want to begin with a general idea. So, my question is, what is the goal of these preparations? And the reason I ask the question is because we may prepare with a thought that, well, we live in this part of the country, so we are preparing for fire season, or maybe we're preparing for hurricanes or whatever. You really can never be so certain as to how an event is going to specifically impact our lives. So, what are we preparing for? What should we allow our preparations to allow us to do?

Lisa:

Very good question, Bruce. One of the most foremost things that we're preparing for is we want to minimize injury. And of course, the topic that we don't like to talk about, but that is loss of life. We want to make sure that you have the basic necessities, such as food, water, medicine and shelter. And we also want you to be able to contact your family, your friends, your supervisor and your coworkers to let them know how are you doing.

But knowing where to go to have your basic needs met, receiving financial aid and physical and mental health support after a disaster is also what we're preparing for. So being prepared for emergencies, it gives you that peace of mind that you're ready should one occur. And as a former soldier, one of the things we always say is, you go to war the way you train. Well, you also handle an emergency or a disaster the way that you prepare for it. So that's why it's important and it does take work and it does take time, but it's important. And every time, especially if you are moved from one duty station to another, it's important that you become familiar with the potential disasters that might occur in your area.

Bruce:

OK, good. So, with that, let's talk about some of the basic steps to take when it comes to preparing for a disaster.

Lisa:

I like to call the basic steps the three Ps. The first one being plan. The second one, prepare. And the third one is practice.

So, for planning, you should build a disaster kit. That's your to-go kit, then make an emergency plan. And to prepare, it's important that you stay informed before a disaster strikes by keeping up with current events and just knowing what's around in your area. You also, as part of preparing is you want to be involved in your community's efforts to

prepare for and respond to a disaster, and then you want to practice. So that's where you want to go out and you want to rehearse your emergency plan. And by rehearsing that, you also will find out was there something that you forgot in your planning that affects in your preparation? So, all of that. So, the three Ps: plan, prepare, practice.

Bruce:

Got it. OK. Let's begin with the disaster kit. What are some tips that you have regarding preparing a disaster kit?

Lisa:

The first step is to start building a core emergency kit, and you want to add extra supplies based on the disasters that are most likely happening in your area. You want to make sure that you have enough supplies for you and your family to remain in your home for several days. And if you have pets, you also want to ensure that you've got supplies and shelter for them as well. One of the things now, if you can't stay in your home for several days and you have to be ready to go, you want to prepare a to-go kit, you want to ensure that most importantly, that you have all the needed medications for your family and your pets. And I mean, that's like first and foremost.

Also, some of the things that you need to consider are important identification documents and financial, property, insurance and other legal documents. So, in your prepared to-go kit, you should place those documents in a waterproof container. Or if you don't have a container, it doesn't have to be fancy, you could always use a Ziplock bag. But additional items that are essential to your kit, especially for those who are stationed abroad, how about a map? Passport, international driver's license, your birth abroad certificate if you have children that are born overseas. You want to have cash in the local currency and in small denominations. You might, if you're in a foreign country, consider having a card with local translations of basic terms. Maybe you need an electrical current converter. If you have children, what I would recommend is in your to-go kit to have small games or comfort items so that it makes it less scary for them. And with families with special needs, I would consider viewing the EFMP & Me for additional resources.

Now, to find a specific checklist of items for your emergency disaster kit, what I would recommend our audience to do is to visit militaryonesource.mil and check out the resources available in the article that we have that's called Before and After Planning in the Event of a Disaster. Or you could visit ready.gov for more information. Or what I like to always say, because our brains are so full of information, it's how do you remember everything? If you can remember militaryonesource.mil, or just go to the search engine and just type in Military OneSource, at the bottom of every Military OneSource page, in the middle of it, you'll find a link that says emergency contacts for disasters and evacuations. And if you click on that, then you're going to be linked to a page that contains the DOD's preparedness guide, which provides information about the topics that we're talking about today. And an important tip to remember is to check all of your

emergency kit supplies and your medications for expiration dates at least once a year and replace anything that has expired.

Bruce:

That's a lot of really great information. And the links that you referred to, the webpages, we'll put those in the program notes. But yeah, you mentioned paper. I think it's really valuable to mention the loss of electronics, or electricity or connectivity. We rely on our phones to a degree that sometimes we just don't even appreciate just how much of our world exists in the digital realm. And the only time I'm sort of reminded of it is if my battery is dying and I can't get to a charger, I go into a panic. But even then, I really don't have an appreciation. Can you talk about that just a little bit, the importance of having paper documents?

Lisa:

Well, absolutely. I mean, one of the things that I mentioned was just to have a map because I know that personally, I get so used to using the map on my phone. And what if it went out, or what if I needed to conserve the battery, or what if there is no way to connect? That is extremely important and that's why a map of the area, and it's important to practice those map skills once in a while. I know that when I was a Boy Scout leader, that was one of the things that we did with our boys, was to make sure that they knew how to read a map so that you have those basic skills for survival. And that's something we have to do in the military. But I also strongly recommend that family members be familiar and practice their map reading skills.

And then when I think of phone numbers, we have them all in our phone. But what if we can't access our phone? What if we had to escape from a fire or a flood really quickly and our phone dropped into the fire or in the water and it's destroyed? So, what do you do? Hopefully you have that in your to-go kit, you have those list of important phone numbers there. And then what happens if you lose everything? You lose your to-go kit, and it's just you and what's on your person. And so, what do you do? And so that's when I always say, you've got to remember Military OneSource, Military OneSource, and if you don't have a way to connect when you see a first responder, when it's the appropriate time to help them to connect to Military OneSource to come to your military family, because that's what Military OneSource is. It's an extension of your military family to get you to the resources and to your unit and back to safety and to get the help that you and your family need.

Bruce:

We're going to talk a little bit about that. That's the accountability aspect of things, and we want to get to that. We have our kit, now we need a plan. So, talk to us about preparing an emergency plan.

Lisa:

Well, it's important to make a plan, and the more that you plan, then the more that you become more comfortable, and then you can act with confidence. And when you have that confidence, that's also very helpful, especially if you've got children or if you're the leader of your family. You want to ensure that when you're preparing your emergency plan, that you involve your whole family in the planning. And that you establish some basic rules so that everyone will know how to communicate and where to meet up before and after the event. And not all of us live with other people. We may not have our immediate family with us. If you live alone, it's important to coordinate your emergency plan with a trusted friend or a family member that maybe not lives with you, but lives near you and so forth, so that they know what you plan to do in the case of an emergency, so they know where to start looking in case you need to be found.

But you can find out more about emergency plans and precautions that are in place at your work. You also need to be familiar with the daycare facility plans as well if you have children and other places that your family frequently visits. It's important to be familiar with the emergency procedures at your installation or in your community and sign up for receiving emergency alerts. You can also download a family communication plan that's designed for parents and kids from the website. It's FEMA, fema.gov.

Bruce:

Yeah, so we'll get that link in the program notes, too. These plans are really amazing. I have to say, I'm often the kind of person who says, "Oh, I know what to do or I'll figure it out." But when a storm is coming or when something has just happened, a lot of stuff is ... it's easier to have it written down in a plan than to think that you're going to come up with it at the last minute. And there's always, always a nugget here and there in the plans that you haven't thought about. I really recommend it.

So, Lisa, I want to kind of change directions a little bit because sort of the military specific aspect of disaster preparation is accountability purposes. And accounting. Checking in with your command is not merely roll call. It's far, far beyond that. They're not merely reporting for duty during a disaster. This is an opportunity for your command to know where you are and to help to keep you safe. Talk to us about what emergency accountability is.

Lisa:

So, accountability is where you're checking in with your component and letting them know, "Hey, I'm here. I'm safe." Or "Hey, I'm here and I need help." And that's where we call it personal accountability and assessment. Now, I will tell you that personal accountability isn't just for military personnel, it's also for family members. And it's especially important, too, for civilians and contractors that are overseas and their families as well. If we don't know where you are and how are you doing, then we can't help you. And this isn't something that you can just say, "Well, I might do it." It's mandatory. It's required in policy. The Army, the Navy, the Department of the Air Force, which includes Space Force, Coast Guard and many other DOD components, they use

the system, which we call Personnel Accountability and Assessment System or PAAS, P-A-A-S. And what you do is you want to check in after an emergency and then you fill out an assessment.

Now the Marines use a different system. It's called Marine Online, and some other DOD components have their own process for accounting for its personnel. Now, the PAAS, it's a very safe and secure way, as well as Marine Online, to share important information and track the status and the whereabouts of Defense Department-affiliated personnel and their family members after a natural or manmade disaster.

Now, I was talking about that assessment module, and that's important because we need to know what are the needs are. Do you need housing? Do you need medication? Do you need a wheelchair for your EFMP because it got destroyed in the disaster? What kind of things do you need? Do you need food? So forth.

Bruce:

OK, so that's PAAS. So, there's a PAAS site for each service, and what we'll do is get a link to each PAAS website for each service, and we'll list them all in the program notes. But Lisa, if you could just give us a general idea, and I know you've been talking about this. But just as a general idea, this is a really powerful tool to get real things that families need when there has been a disaster.

Lisa:

So, let's say for example that a tornado came through your town and just wiped out your home. If you're able to account for yourself through whether it's a first responder, or maybe you're blessed and you still have your cell phone and it works, where you can contact your unit through the PAAS system or account for yourself, and do the assessment, then they can send somebody to come and get you and your family. They can take you to a safe haven, make sure that you are clothed, make sure that you have food and water, that you have shelter over you, and then help you to get back on your feet and make sure that you're safe, you and your family are all safe. So that's just an example of why it's important to account for yourself.

Bruce:

It sounds like a really powerful resource. Lisa, it's been a real pleasure talking to you today. Are there any other resources that you want to recommend for military personnel and their families as they work to prepare for a disaster?

Lisa:

Absolutely. There is one more resource, which is your local military and family support center office, or the American Red Cross, or again, I can't emphasize this enough, Military OneSource. If you remember, militaryonesource.mil. If you forget addresses, well, how do I count myself in that PAAS system? Don't worry about it. Military

OneSource is there. They will be there. You can call them. You can connect online. You may even want to consider putting their phone number in your phone as part of your contacts. And that number is 800-342-9647. And we can also include this as part of the program. But also too, one of my favorite items that we have through Military OneSource is the My Military OneSource app. It's free and all you have to do, and I recommend members of our audience do it today, do it now. Just go onto your phone and go into the App Store and download My Military OneSource app. And this way you have it very quickly, and you don't have to search, you just click on the app and you can be connected to Military OneSource and get the help that you need.

Bruce:

Thank you so much. This has been such an information packed episode and evidence to that will be the many, many links in the program notes. We thank you so very, very much.

Lisa:

You're welcome, Bruce. Thank you.

Bruce:

Lisa is the program manager for the Defense Department's Casualty and Mortuary Affairs and Personnel Accountability Program. She served 23 years in the Army. She was in the Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts. Absolutely the best person to have on the podcast today to talk about preparing for a disaster. We're so grateful to have her with us today.

And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We are a website, we are a call center, we're all over social media and so now we're a podcast. And we hope that you'll subscribe because we cover a whole wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce. Thanks for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.