Mark Peterson - Host:

I am Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

In late 2023, FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, or ODIC, released a new version of its training course IS-368.A, including people with disabilities in disaster operations. We don't always cover specific FEMA training courses on this podcast, but the purpose of this course is somewhat unique in that it really strives to increase awareness and understanding of the need for full inclusion of disaster survivors and FEMA staff who are people with disabilities in all stages of our disaster planning. Designed for all personnel involved in disaster operations, the course provides an introductory overview of information and strategies to include people with disabilities during mitigation, preparedness response and recovery efforts. In disasters, the importance of disability equity and inclusion can't be overstated. On today's episode, we explore how this course provides the needed guidance to ensure physical program and communication access to the whole community. Hey, and while you're here, hang with us after the conversation for a quick update from Sherman Gillis Jr., the director of FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, and we'll talk a little bit about what he's focused on and looking forward to in 2024, the year of resilience.

New Speaker:

Alright, so I'm thrilled to be joined by Sherman Gillums Jr. who has joined us on the podcast once before. And and it's a thrill to talk to you again. You're always such a, a delight to talk to and actually just a really thrilling personality to know. So, Sherman, thanks so much for joining me.

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

I appreciate you for having me on again, Mark, it's always a pleasure.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, we also have Robin Troutman, the acting CEO of the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities. Robin, thanks for joining me and talking to me about this just really important topic.

Robin Troutman:

Thanks so much, Mark. And thank you to Director Gillums, of course, for the invitation. I'm really excited to be here to talk about including people with lived experience in emergency management and this important course.

Mark Peterson - Host:

We have not yet taken the time to speak to any of the many training courses that FEMA offers to the emergency management community and FEMA employees. But this one is particularly important, be just because of the critical nature of including people with disabilities in our disaster planning and operations. And so, we really wanted to take some time to focus in on this new version of the course. But before we do, I'm just hoping maybe we could just set up the stage of the partnership between FEMA's Office of Disability Integration and Coordination, or how we refer to it here at FEMA, ODIC, and the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities and how you all work together and how this came about. So, maybe Sherman, can we start with you?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. Mark. As you know, I joined FEMA back in August of 2022 and deployed to several disasters pretty quickly. That was a pretty busy time of year as soon as I came aboard. But if there was one takeaway I took from that early experience was the importance of partnerships. And they're even more critical to build prior to disasters to ensure that there's a trust bond that exists that makes communication and navigating the voids of uncertainty that are typical in disasters, a lot easier to deal with. It was also the case that FEMA Administrator, Deanne Criswell, charged the agency with putting people first in all that we do. And that included people with disabilities. We used the term meeting people where they are. It's not just a catchphrase or virtue signaling. It is a mission imperative for not just ODIC, but also FEMA. And this goes beyond understanding disabilities. It, it is about how people experience being disabled and how that experience transcends simply being a human in crisis. And it helps us understand that being seen and what that means to each individual is critical to the recovery process. And it's also critical to building that trust capital that we'll need to use to save lives in every disaster.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Robin, what, what is significant about the partnership for you?

Robin Troutman:

Thanks so much, Mark. And I, you know, as director Gillums said, you know, we have to meet people where there are, we have more people with disabilities, whether they're intellectual and developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, you know, more people living longer. And we have more disasters. So, we need to be working together to ensure that we don't have another situation like Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, or even the pandemic where people with disabilities, especially intellectual and developmental disabilities, were seen, you know, not as a priority as people that are not considered disabled. And so, the partnership between FEMA, ODIC and NACDD and the DD councilors has been so so important in, in helping people with intellectual and developmental disabilities survive disasters. And so, and that is not just, you know, just living through the, the, the event and being able to, you know, live in their home and, and live their lives as it was before the, the, the incident happened, whether it's a weather event or another pandemic. So we just, you know, we want to be able to provide services and supports for people with lived experience to be able, just to not be afraid that they're gonna lose their home. They're not gonna be able to you know, take their medicine or plug in their motorized wheelchair, whatever it might be. So, we need to be working in collaboration with FEMA, especially ODIC, to ensure that emergency management are, are prepared to help people with disabilities.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Robin, how does that partnership manifest itself after you know, any particular disaster? Is it advice, is it counsel, is it expertise? How does that come into play?

Robin Troutman:

I'd say it's a lit, a little bit of all of that. I mean, I think it was definitely a combination of us reaching out to FEMA ODIC and FEMA reaching out to us when you know it, especially in some of those states that we see have many more disasters, you know in with Hurricane Harvey in Texas. And then, you know, some of that with Florida and the panhandle, you know, they are, you know, continually at risk of, of some weather incident. So, it's, you know, trying to mitigate and prepare is something that, you know, we wanna prevent any massive evacuations or people not being able to return to their homes. So, being able to partner with Director Gillums and, and his team to help prepare, to train, to get people, have a plan and be ready so, should something happen, and they do have to evacuate that they still are able to, you know, provide and, and take care of themselves or their loved ones.

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

There's also an aspect of bilateral knowledge transfer that's important in this partnership, because even though we're the emergency managers who are assumed to have all the knowledge about what to do during a disaster, having a better understanding of the populations that we're serving is also important. And when you think about intellectual and developmental disabilities, the name alone doesn't say enough. Because you are talking about human beings who are capable and autonomous and in many, many ways when they're given the things they need to function and to navigate society. But, but having a better understanding of who they are when they show up in shelters and maybe hearing advice from them on how we can serve a broader swath of, of the American public during times of a disaster. It makes us better responders. Because We'll have those insights. We'll, we'll be able to recognize things that you know, may appear foreign to somebody who doesn't understand what it means to have these lived experiences. And so I think it makes us a better you know, better servant of the public when we, when we know and understand from a perspective of people like Robin and, and the people she represents through the DD Councils.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yeah. And, and, you know, just in that vein of becoming better at responding and making our operations more effective for all people in the community, Sherman, the reason why we're, we're really talking here is about the, the new version of the IS-368.A. So, can you talk to me about what that course is and what the purpose is?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. FEMA released an updated training course titled, "Including People with Disabilities in Disaster Operations." And, and the purpose was to increase awareness and the, and understanding of the need for full inclusion of all disaster survivors and, and FEMA staff at all stages of disaster planning. The course itself provides instructions on integrating the needs of people with disabilities into disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation with planning as an essential aspect of effective emergency management. It also teaches the distinction between disabilities and access and functional needs, along with an updated list of terminology of terms aligned with the needs of people with disabilities. I also think it creates a pretty good forum for an ongoing conversation around knowledge building and, and ways for my office to get feedback from participants like NACDD who can help us identify ways we can refine our own understanding of how to package this knowledge.

New Speaker:

So, we're talking about a course that's not static, right? This was the, the, the latest iteration to be sent out. But what we hope is that we'll hear from users about ways that we can refine how we put this knowledge together. Because, as I say all the time, equity is a bottom-up process, right? Not top-down. It's not driven by what our intentions are. It's driven by how people experience what we do. And a big part of that is how we convey knowledge and, and how we use that and what we learned to refine the process because we have to adapt with the threat, in this case the shifts in climate and all the things that Robin talked about earlier, that are, that are the emerging realities in what we do.

Robin Troutman:

And something that, you know, we need to remember, not only just for emergency management, but what is so important about, you know, disability advocacy is if you've met one person with a disability, you've met one person with a disability, no two people have the same experience. So, to create, you know, just blanket, well, this should fit everyone, that's not the case. So, by updating these trainings for responders to understand that not everyone with Cerebral Palsy is gonna have the same evacuation needs, perhaps, because not everyone with Cerebral Palsy has the same symptoms. And so, being able to update and bring people with lived experience more to the front of these conversations really does a better job, as Director Gillum said, of the responders responding more efficiently and, and, and meeting the needs of where they are.

Mark Peterson - Host:

We put together a variety of trainings at FEMA and they're intended for different audiences. So, Sherman, who do you envision being the primary focus for for experiencing this training and then putting it into application?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

I, I wouldn't rank 'em. I would say who's probably gonna use, use it more are probably gonna be those people we consider our partners, and these are state emergency managers, county level emergency managers, the various volunteer organizations where this is their primary purpose, initially, right? And so, we're talking about partnerships at all levels of what we do. But there's also a, a breadth aspect to this. The audience in terms of the breadth will be just about anybody such as stakeholders, community ambassadors and leaders, advocates, people who have an interest in not just you know, bettering the lives of people with disabilities, but also having society have a better understanding and embrace people more. So, I think anybody who's got a mission that that, that intersects at disability inclusion, but also during disasters, may have a role that they didn't sign up for in disaster response.

New Speaker:

So, I think anybody who's, who represents an organization where you've got a constituency you know, with unique needs or, or where society has to you know, adapt with a, with a, an understanding that's not common they, they might be ideal to take this course because the one thing you don't wanna do is to find out that you needed this type of training after the disaster's already happened. And so, because the training is free, all it requires is time. People register on the Emergency Management Institute platform and sign up for this training, take the course. There's also a litany of other courses, but this one is pretty important now, before the disaster strikes.

Robin Troutman:

And I would recommend, you know, teachers in schools taking it too, just because they, you know, I know I was in school when a hurricane hit my, when I grew up in Long Island. So, schools, I would highly recommend that teachers, principals and just, you know, people in school districts, PTA, they take the course as well.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Oh, that's a great, that's a great suggestion there. Yeah. Sherman one of FEMA's, and as you well know one of FEMA's strategic goals is to lead the, lead the whole of community in climate resilience. And so, I'm wondering we talked about this just a little bit, but maybe you could expound on it, of how the training kind of really responds to emerging realities of climate change and, and really the idea of environmental justice.

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. Well, I've got sort of two influences. One is the FEMA administrator who made it clear that we will lead in the mission of, of making the nation more resilient to shifts in the climate. In fact, this is the year of resilience for the agency. But the other influence was the reality that weather's changing, and it's changing in ways that are profound. And what I mean by that is not only are weather events becoming more frequent, they're also happening at greater costs. Last year was a record year for a billion dollar disasters, but also, they're happening in places where they didn't happen historically. So, you may live in a, in an area of the country where you never saw a tornado and may quickly find yourself in a situation where maybe the city wasn't prepared because it never happened before. You know, places like New York before Tropical Storm Sandy that wasn't common to see that type of weather, but now it is.

New Speaker:

And last year we responded to several tornadoes. We started the year in Selma. We ended the year in Clarksville, Tennessee. And so, we saw tornadoes during the, in the deep winter, which wasn't common. So. We're now seeing the need to be more resilient through preparedness in ways that we never had to, before. And so, this, this imperative that the administrator has issued to us helps us really focus on what's most important here, which is the preparedness part. Not just reacting to weather, but preparing for it by making sure that we've built resiliency in our infrastructure. And that includes making sure that people who have access to functional needs, whether it's structural in nature or functional can, can have that access, not just before the disaster, but even after the disaster when we're rebuilding. So it's a continuum of accessibility that we need to build into how we how we're set up here in this country to prepare for the weather changes that they don't have to be inevitable, but they are probable in many ways.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Robin is the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, also thinking a bit about environmental justice and, and how climate change impacts the community.

Robin Troutman:

Absolutely. I mean, you think about just, you know, people with disabilities across all marginalized groups, and if anything, it is the largest marginalized minority in the United States and globally. And so, they're, you know, more times than not, they are the ones that are most impacted by these extreme weather events. They're living in, you know, rural communities, poor communities, and maybe some, a lot of people just don't have access to services to, you know, evacuate quickly. So, because these weather events are happening at a more impactful and intense pattern, but also the frequency you know, people with disabilities are, you know, more impacted by it because of, of, of their own, where they live and, and their status. So, we are continually to look at, you know, how communities are working to help reduce accessibility issues in their, in their, their communities and their states and their localities, but also just, you know, a lot of ableism that still goes around with it in ensuring that people with disabilities their lives are valued just as much as anyone else.

New Speaker:

So, they should be seen as just a priority, as, as evacuating anyone. So, and that is a problem because they, sometimes they're not. And we saw that with the pandemic that, you know, if, if, if people with disabilities are tending to be sicker and, and maybe, you know, we need to ration care, and we don't want that to happen ever again, because again, lives are valuable. Whether you're a person with a disability or you're a person with a temporary disability or not, your life is valuable. And so, we need to create systems that make sure that you can live your life just as anyone else.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yeah. So, shifting gears here just a little bit. So, March is Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month. Robin, tell me a little bit about the history of this month for those that don't know and its importance.

Robin Troutman:

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much. So, yeah. Back in 1987, President Ronald Reagan issued a proclamation urging the all Americans to provide individuals with developmental disabilities, the encouragement and opportunities they need to lead and live productive lives, and to achieve their full potential. So, you know, we each year, NACDD, the National Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities, along with our many disability partners, our DD councils and our advocates, we have a a campaign every year for Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month that, it's to raise awareness about developmental disabilities, intellectual disabilities, how to communicate the importance of inclusion, how to sharing the stories of individuals with disabilities, because we can only really understand the impact of something if we're hearing from the person who is living it. We try to expand the conversation of inclusion and accessibility.

New Speaker:

We, we encourage the public to share stories of real, real true systems change and adversity over ableism. We're not looking for, oh, in this high school, they nominated a person with Down Syndrome to be homecoming king. Like, well, that's nice, but that's not really, you know, true inclusion. It's a, it's a nice story to have. We wanna see that small business of John's Crazy socks and how he's now, you know, a man with Down Syndrome and he's, you know, sold however many pairs of socks he has, 'cause It's, they're really cool. You know, we wanna hear about those stories. And so, you know, we, that's what we look to promote is stories, photos, videos, resources that really show true inclusion, true equity because, you know, people can be included, but if they don't feel like they belong, is it really an equitable experience? So, we really wanna promote all of that within the month. And working with FEMA and ODIC is giving us a lot of really great information on the importance of valuing people with disabilities in their lives.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Hey, Sherman. So, if, if we can really focus our message during this month how can we really think about communicating with first responders and emergency managers and for the things that they need to know or maybe can learn during this focused month?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Well, one of the honors I had last year was to be the keynote speaker at the NACDD conference where I issued a challenge to the attendees, and this is gonna answer your question more in a roundabout way, to make their presence known, to go hold your state officials accountable for putting you at the table so that when your voice is heard, this is how we'll hear those voices. You're at the table, you're there during the planning process. And if that hasn't happened yet, or if you don't see yourselves or your constituents represented in those state plans, then you've got a job to do. And that means you have to, if you have to elbow your way in, you get to the table so that people like me will hear you in those environments where they need to be heard. We don't need to have this be an afterthought in planning or a, a bandaid that we put on a situation.

New Speaker:

We need to have people like those who represent the DD councils at the table, giving us instruction and insights into lived experience. Again, that will make us better responders. And so, I think that's the way that we, that we as first responders and as emergency managers hear from them, by having them be at the table. But, but in many cases, that's gonna have to be a, you know, a, they're gonna have to assert themselves in some instances and that's what I encouraged them to do last year. So, this year will be about working with Robin and NACDD to facilitate that, right? In places, especially where we know disasters happen frequently, or there are perennial events. So, we're gonna work specifically with individual DD councils, regional DD councils at regional level, to to walk them through what that looks like and create templates for how it looks when you see your constituents in that planning, right. And the more we do that, the more we develop these promising practices, they then become best practices that folks like me and folks like all of us who work at FEMA will get used to, get used to seeing and consider the norm.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Robin, will you be connecting, or do you already connect via the councils with maybe state emergency management, local emergency management you know, pre-disaster? I mean, it sounds like we already have that, you know, a, a great potential connection for when a disaster strikes, but in the planning, is that happening?

Robin Troutman:

Yeah, there are, you know, there are definitely states that do this better and more frequently like Florida, Texas, because of just, you know, as Director Gillums said, the frequency of these events that are happening. So, we do have some councils that are really embedded into that system, but a lot more as we see, you know, snow in Buffalo and, you know, a lot of snow in Buffalo, and then, you know, random tornadoes and, and you know, things like that in states that maybe don't normally see tornadoes. I know southern Maryland every so often gets a random tornado, and you're not always prepared because it's usually pretty, pretty, pretty random. So, it's, you know, we, we are making some great strides, and there are a lot of states that are doing that. But it's just a process. I do know that in some of the regions there are working with the FEMA regional coordinators but, you know, more work could always be done to, to make those, those connections stronger.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You know, before we close out, Sherman, you mentioned that there are a, a number of other trainings that can support the, IS-368.A, you know, a after you take that one and you wanna continue your studies, what are some of the other courses that maybe FEMA has to offer, or, or maybe even that are practical to emergency managers that maybe aren't specifically offered by FEMA, but what are some of those courses that if emergency managers wanna continue on their studies might want to consider?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. I live by the, the mantra that one could never learn too much across all aspects of life, but certainly in this business, even among first responders that have a lot of experience the dynamics of disasters are constantly changing and, and so must we through continuous learning. Well, the Emergency Management Institute platform, which can be found at training.fema.gov, offers a catalog of training opportunities on topics from the science of disasters to advanced incident command systems. And I think there's so many there that you really want to have people go on there and navigate around and find these courses. Again, we meet them where they are, you know, some people have done this before, some haven't. So, I would encourage your listeners to go on training.fema.gov and look at the catalog of, of programs from active shooter drill training and things like that, that are, that are, again, you may never need it, but you certainly don't want to have needed it once something happens. So, and, and the only cost to users is the time to register and take the various trainings.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Sherman we've got this new version of the the course. Can you just kind walk me through maybe the sections of the course and, and what the topics are that are gonna be covered?

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. I think the most important one is probably the introduction to the vernacular and how we speak the language of lived experience for people with disabilities. I mean, these are terms that people from the community come up with. So, it's important that people who are not in that community understand that this is how we communicate. And when you, when you hear terms like disability, it's not the same as inability, right. Disability is kind of how you're packaged. Inability is something that happens to you. And I think when we conflate the terms in training, you know, or, or use or associate certain terms like vulnerable, automatically with disabilities, it's important to understand how that's read by somebody from the community. So, I think the user will first find that there's a, there's a vocabulary to how we talk about disability. And when we talk about access and functional needs, that's a, that's sort of a broader category of people who may not be disabled but may mirror the effects of disability.

New Speaker:

You think about a woman who's pregnant in the late stages of pregnancy, you think about an older person who's not regarded as disabled, but may have some limitations that limit, which is why it's important to, again, in the training, to to hear the vocabulary that's a bit different, focus on the environment. We're not focusing on diagnoses. We're not focusing on, you know, what a personal can and can't do. We're looking at ways the environment disenables people. And as you go through the sections, it'll, it'll talk about that more in a broader context before getting into the finer aspects of disability integration in emergency management some of the vernacular that I use that's pretty common around here shows up in some of the training because we want to be able to communicate across different lines of experience. And so, that's why I think it's not just ideal for professionals, it's also ideal for the lay person to understand how we talk about these things.

New Speaker:

And again, we're gonna refine it because language is pliable. You know, language evolves. So it's, it's what it is right now with its various sections. But over time, maybe in a year or two, we may have to refine it even more as we, as we see language evolve, and as more people in the public sphere understand the importance of climate resilience and, and add their voices to this. But I think it's a great dynamic set of training interfaces. There's some videos in there that give you sort of a, a, a a scenario based idea of how to think through those types of events where disability integration is included.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Robin, it's been, it's actually a very enlightening at least from my position here in, in FEMA Region 5, which is in the center of the country, to just hear about what the Association of Councils on Developmental Disabilities is doing and how this integration is taking place. So, how can listeners, no matter where they fall in in the tiered system at the local level, the state level, or even the federal level, how can they learn more about the work that you're doing and that the councils are doing around the country?

Robin Troutman:

Sure. Thanks so much. So you know, I, as a background, you know, there is a DD council in every state and territory of the United States, and they're federally required to be there. There is a piece of legislation that requires each state and territory to have this council, this of which 60% of the members are people with lived experience or their family member. So, it's the only entity in the state that is led by people with lived experience to make some major decisions on how systems can be changed and updated to ensure inclusion and equity for people with disabilities. Absolutely. The NACDD website, it's nacdd.org. And then again, we have a full list on our, on our website of all of our DD councils, all 56 with their executive directors listed, and also contact information and reach out to them, learn from them. They are doing amazing work in your states and territories, not only around emergency management and preparedness, but, you know, employment and, and voting rights and recreation and education, really making some great changes in the states and territories to ensure full inclusion and equity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So, you know, they, it just fabulous entity led by people with lived experience. So, definitely reach out to them. And yeah, I mean, you can't, you can't, I can't say enough positive things about the DD councils. They just do some really important work that, you know, and fill those needs and those gaps within state systems that maybe they can't do it. So, they rely on the DD councils and they're doing some really important work on looking at how the disability networks and the aging networks need to coordinate, especially around times of, of disaster. So, really exciting time to be promoting the work of the DD councils, but also the, a really amazing training that FEMA ODIC is putting in.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Kinda walk me through, what, what are we talking about here when we are thinking about and focused on developmental disabilities?

Robin Troutman:

So, according to the CDC, the definition of a developmental disability, it's a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical learning language or behavior areas. So, and usually the people are born with them, or they have an, an onset like they, they get diagnosed by the age of 23 and they will, those will be impacted like day-to-day functioning. So, things like eating, dressing themselves, bathing, walking and they will, they will last a person's lifetime, and that's what makes it developmental, is that it starts at birth or very young age up to age 23 and will last through their life.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Sherman I know that you are always very busy and you are certainly out in the community often, and so I just wanted to take a second and, and, and just check in with you and hear a little bit about what you're doing this year and what we can expect from the Office of Disability Integration Coordination throughout 2024.

Sherman Gillums, Jr.:

Sure. As you know, Mark, there's never a dull day in the work that we do. There's always some aspect of the mission taking place around the country. This year will be the year of resilience for the agency. That's our message to the public, that we want the nation to be more resilient in, in response to the shifts in the climate. But one of the most exciting things I get to do this year is focus on young people, our little responders. And so, I was fortunate enough to go to the Langley School, and we actually did a tornado demonstration, and we talked to, from first grade all the way up to sixth grade, you know, about the effects of weather to take the mystery out of it. And then as we better understand weather, we understand what we can do when there's a, a weather event.

New Speaker:

And what little people can do is talk to their parents about the importance of preparedness. You know, talk to their mom and dad about, you know, what would we do if we had to leave suddenly, or if we were told we had to evacuate, and what little responders can do so that they're a part of this and they don't feel so swept up in what's going on. So, I'm gonna focus all year on, on going to as many schools that will invite us in and talk about the importance of preparedness, take the mystery out of weather. We're also gonna go to universities talk to soon to be graduates about maybe considering a career in emergency management. So, that's really exciting for me because I love to teach. You know, I've got four daughters and two sons myself, and, and, and as when I came to FEMA, they got excited about the work that I do. So, I, I hope to have that permeate around the country so that we are indeed more resilient. But we're also, we also lean into what resilience means from the youngest of us to the oldest of us.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at fema.gov/podcast.