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Tempting fate: Seeking safe ground

Worries arise over how to evacuate the area's vulnerable residents in a flood.

By Phillip Reese -- Bee Staff Writer

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More than 150,000 of Sacramento County's most vulnerable residents - the elderly, the poor and the disabled - live in areas prone to substantial flooding, and local officials acknowledge they don't know whether they could quickly get them to safe ground.

That worries Lloyd Hudson. A downtown Sacramento resident who lost a leg a few years ago to an infection, Hudson remembers watching news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and seeing how people like him had trouble evacuating New Orleans.

"I wondered how I would get up and get out," said Hudson. He'd have to put on his prosthetic leg "and then I'd get out, but I wouldn't be able to move very fast."

The poor and immobile tend to get left behind, as news coverage of Katrina showed again and again. Many of New Orleans' poor didn't have cars. Lots of elderly and disabled residents couldn't drive. The city wasn't prepared to get them out, so they were stuck.

And, much to the disappointment of residents like Hudson, something like that could happen here, say some emergency officials and advocates for the disadvantaged.

Matching U.S. Census data with state flood maps, the Bee found 54,000 residents listed as elderly, 89,000 listed as poor and 40,000 with a physical disability living in Sacramento County areas that could be under at least 2 feet of water if a bad flood hit - enough to require an evacuation. Those figures include about 25,000 residents who show up two or three times - for example, listed as both elderly and disabled.

"I would suggest to you that perhaps there are even more," said Carole Hopwood, who was manager of the Sacramento County Sheriff's Department Emergency Operations Division until retiring at the turn of the year. In the event of a serious flood, the division, in conjunction with state and local governments, would be charged with coordinating evacuation efforts.

Hopwood has major concerns. First, she said, emergency officials don't know where to find all the people who most need help. If immobile residents aren't in a nursing home or receiving in-home health services, chances are the city and county aren't aware of them. Second, even if emergency officials knew exactly where each immobile person lived, they might not be able to get them out in time.

"We simply don't have enough resources to adequately evacuate all these people," she said.

Hopwood's interim replacement, former fire chief Rick Martinez, agrees more needs to be done. "I think," he said, "there are going to be many more people than we have resources to help."

A recent training exercise simulating a large-scale evacuation during a disaster did not instill confidence. One blind participant called it a complete flop.

And while many areas likely would flood slowly in the event of a levee break or breach, that's little solace for the immobile.

David Mana-ay, chairman of the Sacramento County Disability Advisory Committee, puts it bluntly: If a big flood hit Sacramento tomorrow, some immobile residents likely would die.

"There seems to be a multi-tier rescue plan," said Mana-ay, an elderly Vietnam veteran who has trouble getting around. "Them that have, will get. Them that have less, will get less. Them that are old and disabled, God help them."

Many exposed to danger

More than one out of every three residents in areas most prone to flooding in Sacramento County are poor, disabled and/or elderly.

The disadvantaged are scattered across the city. Thousands live in the old North Sacramento and Del Paso Heights area. Thousands more live across town in Meadowview. Even the Pocket, wealthier than most parts of the city, has thousands of residents who are elderly and hundreds with physical disabilities.

In short, if an evacuation order hits a wide area, emergency officials can't just send buses to a few places with large concentrations of flood-vulnerable residents. Those residents are nearly everywhere.

About 14,000 vulnerable residents, for example, reside in downtown or midtown. One is Susan McKinney, who lives in the same low-income, senior apartment complex as Hudson. She is blind and doesn't know how she would get to high ground in a flood.

"I don't know where I would go," McKinney said.

Michael Dunne, who is partially blind, also lives downtown. An advocate at Resources for Independent Living, he hopes friends would come get him in the event of a flood. Otherwise, he would have to wait things out in his second-floor apartment.

"I'm not a bad swimmer," he said jokingly.

Sharon Mamuyac-Floyd lives farther south, between Mack and Florin roads. She finds it difficult to get around because of complications from polio. Until recently, her elderly mother lived nearby and also had trouble leaving the house. After being stuck during floods a couple of times, her mother decided to move.

"She said, 'I'm getting out of here,' " Mamuyac-Floyd said.

Mamuyac-Floyd thinks she would be able to leave her neighborhood when a flood strikes - if her husband were home.

Advocates for the elderly, the poor and the disabled have little praise for local planning efforts so far - several repeated the phrase "no plan" when talking about efforts to get the immobile out of the path of a flood.

What about, they ask ...

* The deaf? "The TV programs don't have captioning or any kind of news for us," said Lois Diamond, an Orangevale woman who is deaf. Though not in an area with high flood risk, Diamond worries about the thousands of deaf residents who are. "I got secondhand information about things for 40 years. Don't you think the government and the state should take some responsibility?"

* The homeless? "There is no plan. Nobody has told us what to do. We'd like to know," said Garren Bratcher, co-director of Friendship Park, part of Loaves & Fishes, which provides aid to the homeless. He estimates about 300 homeless people stay very close to rivers in Sacramento and several hundred more stay in alleys and streets near downtown.

* The blind? "I do have a lot of friends who don't have someone sighted they can turn to," said Gene Lozano, a blind man who lives near American River College, adding that he is concerned about whether shelters or evacuation buses could accommodate seeing eye dogs. "(The blind) would just have to stay where they are and take their chances."

* The poor? "Poor people don't have cars," said Frances Gracechild, director of Resources for Independent Living, an advocacy group for the poor and disabled. "They are under the radar screen for support." In a worst-case scenario, emergency officials say, poor residents without cars could walk to safety, though they acknowledge that is not ideal.

* Seniors in nursing and assisted-living homes? "Most of these facilities have evacuation plans out of their facility, but there is no plan about where these seniors would go," said Arnie Godmintz, an active member of the local Grey Panthers, an advocacy group for the elderly.

The Bee found more than 30 nursing and assisted-living homes in Sacramento County in high-risk areas. Whether Godmintz is right is a matter of some dispute. Mary Jann, director of regulatory affairs for the California Association of Health facilities, countered that nursing homes do uniformly have measures in place to get residents to safety, as required by the state. But one of three nursing homes contacted at random by The Bee had no plans to get residents to high ground.

Sketchy response plans

It's not that emergency officials haven't thought about what to do about the flood-vulnerable. Some plans are in place, though several emergency officials acknowledge that the plans - and the resources available to carry them out - remain inadequate.

Hopwood said officials have discussed going to the Board of Supervisors later this year to ask that a consultant be hired to help identify the immobile and come up with strategies for evacuating them. She also said the county may start mass-distributing cards that less mobile residents can fill out and send back to authorities.

But the real key, Hopwood said, is for the vulnerable to make sure their friends and family are ready to help them get to high ground. "They need to put in place their own emergency response plans," she said.

Beyond that, local flood evacuation plans get sketchy.

Ideally, the Emergency Operations Center, which would coordinate the response of city and county emergency workers, would be activated by the time floodwaters reached residential areas. Officials then would call Regional Transit, which has about 250 buses, Hopwood said. The usefulness of those buses depends on drivers being able and willing to come in to work.

If things got really bad, Hopwood said, the California National Guard could be called in and helicopters could begin pulling out some people.

A private company likely would be asked to help. Paratransit Inc. has about 170 small, 16-passenger buses that it uses to transport about 17,000 people registered to use their service, said Mary Steinert, the company's associate director. In a pinch, those buses can handle six passengers in wheelchairs at once.

But here's the biggest hitch: Government officials don't know where the majority of these immobile residents live.

Sacramento city and county officials know about some of them. Nonprofit agencies know about some more. So does the power company. And the state. And a few transit agencies.

But privacy rules keep many of those groups from sharing information. The county, for example, has no legal jurisdiction to demand to see a roster of disabled residents kept by a nonprofit organization, officials say. So there is no master list.

"There are a large number of people in the county and cities that we don't have a good handle on," Hopwood said.

Hopwood does know about 18,000 people who receive in-home support services through the county. Many of those could evacuate on their own or with help from family, she said.

Paratransit, of course, is aware of the people on its list of registered users, but they "wouldn't necessarily include all people with disabilities. There are thousands and thousands of people with disabilities who use public transit," said Steinert.

The city of Sacramento is working with SMUD to locate immobile residents. But those efforts, intensified since Hurricane Katrina, haven't yet resulted in an information exchange, leaving the city's list of the immobile residents far from complete.

For example, downtown and in midtown, the city counts roughly 1,100 people - those in nursing homes and those using in-home support services - who might need help evacuating. But taking into account all of the poor, elderly and/or disabled who recent history indicates might actually need help there, the Census Bureau shows a much higher number: about 14,000.

"We don't have all those people pinpointed," said Jerry Colivas, emergency services manager for city of Sacramento. "We do know about quite a few."

Also, just pinpointing immobile residents doesn't mean they could be evacuated. City and county officials doubt they have the resources to get everyone out in the event of a large flood.

Those in nursing homes or assisted-living facilities might get lucky, officials say. Others, like Hudson and McKinney, who live in senior apartment complexes also have the advantage of numbers - bunched together, they could conceivably be evacuated if enough buses were available.

But the resources to get everyone else who needs help out of a flood zone simply aren't there, said Martinez and Hopwood.

"I wouldn't want to have a false sense of security," Martinez said. "If you start looking at mass transit, and that's assuming you can put 40 or 50 people on a bus ... that's 1,000-plus trips."

Sacramento city officials are a little more optimistic but say they have as many questions as answers.

"I'm confident that we can do a very good job but there is still the question of, 'Are we going to get everybody? Can we get everybody?' " Colivas said. "I think the resources are there but when the time comes, is everything going to come together?"

Colivas noted that the area's emergency officials recently completed a training exercise - "Golden Guardian" - which simulated the evacuation of a large group of people. While Golden Guardian hypothesized a series of terrorist attacks, including an explosion on the Tower Bridge, officials said it tested many of the same government resources as a flood.

Colivas said the exercise produced mixed results for helping the immobile. "There were some good points to it and some things we need to work on," he said.

Dunne, the blind downtown resident, didn't think the results were mixed. He was among those with disabilities who participated and, when it came to evacuating the immobile, he rated it an outright failure.

Victims with special needs, Dunne said, were "completely ignored" - even told to move on their own, on foot, at least five times during the exercise.

"We had to walk to a triage area - three-quarters of a mile," Dunne said, noting that such a walk is difficult for someone who is blind or in a wheelchair. "The first responders seemed to have little or no idea how to deal with people with disabilities."

Colivas acknowledged that Dunne's observations have merit. But, he said, buses did successfully move some disabled and immobile residents during the exercise. In other words, some got good help, some didn't. He called it "a learning experience."

Best to have own plan

Everyone, from emergency officials to advocates, said those with trouble moving by themselves should devise their own evacuation plans.

Community-based organizations, Martinez said, should take the initiative and identify ways to help their clients leave a flood zone.

Disabled, poor and elderly residents should strategize with their families and friends and set up a plan in case of a flood, Hopwood said. "People can't afford to be cavalier about this anymore," she said.

But, advocates ask, what will happen when friends panic and try to save their own skin? When those who failed to make plans face the consequences? When those who can't leave are left with no one to rely on?

Take New Orleans. While some left in the flood zone chose not to leave, many simply couldn't. In now-infamous images, thousands of poor, disabled and elderly residents wound up homeless, stuck for days in makeshift, unsanitary shelters.

That's what happens, said Mana-ay, the disability advisory chair, when evacuation plans rely too heavily on the ability of immobile residents to get out on their own or with the help of friends. It's what, he said, could happen here.

"I guess they would just take the able-bodied," he said, "and leave everyone else."

HOW THE BEE PERFORMED ITS ANALYSIS FOR THIS STORY

To figure out how many disabled, elderly and poor residents live in high-risk flood areas, The Bee matched a map from the state Department of Water Resources with U.S. Census 2000 tract data.

The state's map shows the results of a storm that could happen once every 200 years and multiple levee breaks. Almost all of the flooded zones in the state's map also appear in the federal government's 100-year floodplain map.

Any census tract where the majority of land would be covered by at least 2 feet of water was included in the analysis. Because some census tracts at the edge of flood zones wouldn't be completely covered with water, a relatively small number of people likely made it into the analysis who wouldn't be under 2 feet of water. On the other hand, the census population estimates are five years old, and the population in most areas of the city has grown since then.

There are 183,000 listings for vulnerable people living in flood areas, but The Bee estimates that roughly 25,000 residents are counted two or three times. That's because some people, for example, are both elderly and poor.

The Census Bureau breaks down the physically handicapped and poor by age, so determining which elderly handicapped and elderly poor would show up twice was not difficult. There were about 19,000 of those residents.

The Census Bureau does not, however, break down the total number of residents who are both poor and physically disabled. Using other sources, The Bee was able to estimate that about 7,000 of the physically disabled poor live in flood zones.

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