

The following article was written by Ann Busche, Director of Public Health and Human Services for St. Louis County. It was originally published in the Duluth Budgeteer in November 2012.

Winter's here. Are you ready?

After last year's mild winter and the start of this year's winter, with its 45-50 degree temperatures in November, it may be easy to forget how severe our winter weather can get. If we can learn anything from Superstorm Sandy, it's that the force of nature can be brutal and devastating, and the help needed after a major storm can stress or exceed the capacity of the governmental and volunteer agencies whose mission it is to provide that help.

One way that you can help is to make sure your family is prepared to be self-sufficient for three to five days. If those who have the means and ability to prepare actually do so, it allows government agencies such as Public Health and Human Services, or non-profit agencies such as the Red Cross, to focus on those who don't have the ability such as the elderly, sick or disabled.

Some basic things you can do:

- Stock up on food and water – bottled water, canned goods, ready to eat foods, snacks and any special foods needed by those on a special diet. Don't forget the family dog or cat!
- Have health and personal cleanliness supplies on hand – make sure you have any prescription medications needed, toilet paper, waterless hand disinfectant and basic first aid such as bandages, pain medication, etc.
- Have household supplies on hand, especially batteries (in the correct sizes needed) to power flashlights and radios, plus cleaning supplies for any after-storm clean up needs.

As winter approaches, one of the most likely scenarios for us is a major snowstorm with power outages. If the power goes out, not only does the refrigerator no longer keep food cold and safe to eat, but many homes will also lose heat and running water. Never use a natural gas or propane stove/oven to heat your home and if you have a fireplace or wood stove, make sure there's good ventilation so carbon monoxide build up doesn't occur. Keep the area you are in warmer by closing the doors to rooms you don't need. Keep yourself warm by dressing in layers, including a hat; huddle with loved ones under a blanket or two.

One more tip on winter safety – don't forget to have an emergency kit in your car. On a daily basis, keep a shovel, windshield scraper, blanket, boots, hat, gloves, bright ribbon or cloth, and flashlight in your car. If you're going on a longer trip, add water and snacks. If you get stranded, don't try to walk to safety. Use that bright ribbon and tie it on the antenna, run the car and use the heater for 10 minutes of every hour to keep the space warmer, and crack one window away from the blowing wind to allow air flow.

Two great resources for additional information are:

The Minnesota Department of Health's website (follow the link to preparing for natural disasters)

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/emergency/natural/index.html>

"Don't be Left out in the Dark, Weathering Floods, Storms, and Power Outages"

<http://www.health.ny.gov/publications/7064.pdf> is the direct link