

Situation

In 2018, the Emergency Preparedness Program in Tennessee Department of Health's Southeast Region (SER) began partnering with agencies and individuals with subject matter expertise in functional and access needs. This started with a single goal: to be better prepared to communicate with deaf individuals who might report to a community reception center (CRC) in the event of the release of radiological material from a nuclear power plant. A CRC is a site to which the public can report to be scanned for radiological contamination and, if contaminated, given instructions to decontaminate on-site. Now, the SER coordinates a Functional and Access Needs Support (FANS) Workgroup who has assisted with the development of response resources for FANS.

Intervention

On July 10, 2025, the Southeast Region coordinated a CRC exercise in McMinn County. One of the workgroup partners with Tennessee's Council on Developmental Disabilities notified council members of the opportunity to participate in the exercise. The Hood family chose to participate. Their daughter Alaina is non-verbal and uses assistive technology. Her parents, Kevin and Chrissy, suggested that they be processed through following a scenario in which they were all contaminated but that caused them not to be able to assist Alaina through physical contact with her or her device. The family stated that they were interested in helping the SER improve response for individuals with functional and access needs "even if it makes us and others a little uncomfortable". The family was successfully processed through and were very pleased with how prepared the CRC workers were to assist Alaina.



Pictured left to right: Matthew Bradley, FEMA; Chrissy, Alaina, and Kevin Hood; Robert Goff, Tennessee Department of Health Southeast Region

Impact

SER understands the importance of consulting with individuals and organizations who have subject matter expertise regarding functional and access needs when developing plans and response resources. Including them in exercises and events, however, helps everyone experience planned response processes in a realistic setting. The Hood family's willingness to be uncomfortable—and SER's willingness to do the same—gave both the SER Emergency Preparedness Program and response partners like the Council on Developmental Disabilities an opportunity to understand needs and expectations, live out the concept of "nothing about us without us", and most importantly, to develop relationships that will enhance the State of Tennessee's ability to meet the needs of all citizens.

The PHEP Program establishes a nationwide public health emergency management system that strengthens the ability of our nation's communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from health and medical threats - ***saving lives 24/7/365.***