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Helping victims, families connect in emergencies

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Even without terror attacks, hurricanes or Lincoln Park porch collapses, more than 1 million unconscious, unidentified people turn up in U.S. hospital emergency rooms each year.

Some are children who have been in car accidents, or runners who ventured out with just a front door key tied to their shoes. Some are Alzheimer's patients who wandered into danger.

Locating the next of kin for these victims can be a painstaking process for health care workers, and in 44 states isn't even required by law. But family members, once shut out of the emergency room, are often the ones who can provide critical medical information, such as blood type, allergies and current medication as well as a medical history. They need to be contacted.

Janet and Laura Greenwald, a mother-daughter writing team, found this out the hard way several years ago after Janet's 71-year-old mother, Elaine, slipped in the bathroom of her Chicago home. Elaine wasn't able to communicate and the hospital didn't immediately notify the family, even though their phone numbers were listed on her records, the Greenwalds said.

When the hospital did call, nearly a week later, it was too late. Elaine died alone, from complications that the Greenwalds said could have been avoided.

When the Greenwalds discovered that health care facilities aren't legally obligated to contact next of kin, they spearheaded the Next of Kin Law, which requires emergency personnel to make a reasonable effort to call the family within 24 hours. Illinois and California passed the law in 2001 and four other states have followed. In May, Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.) introduced a federal version of the bill.

Still, the Greenwalds were just getting rolling. They formed the Next of Kin Education Project and created a free training kit called the Seven Steps Information Kit (www.nokep.org) to teach health care professionals how to quickly notify next of kin in almost any situation.

Just before Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, they joined with the National Next of Kin Registry (www.nokr.org) and Shoewallet.com—a company that makes credit-card-sized pockets for shoes—to help people safeguard their loved ones when disaster strikes. "We're helping people fill in the missing piece," said Laura Greenwald.

Their timing couldn't be better. The NOKR, started by Mark Cerney after he discovered a loved one had died after she was already buried, is a database with next-of-kin information for more than 5 million Americans. Last week, the registry, billed as a "lifeline to your family," was flooded with 5,000 calls an hour. Though the Red Cross (redcross.org) is the nation's primary family connector for disasters, the NOKR allowed hurricane victims to post "I'm safe" messages and "Lost" pleas from worried family

members.

But the NOKR can be used for more common emergencies, whether you lose your toddler at Target or your teenager runs away from home. It's designed to help anyone whose family member is missing, injured or deceased and is free to the public as well as local and state agencies. Families, meanwhile, can take other simple steps to prepare for emergencies. Storing "In Case of Emergency" contact phone numbers into a cell phone or PDA under 'ICE' rather than a name has already paid off for several trauma victims at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center, said Sharon Ward, the hospital's director of emergency, EMS and trauma services.

Ward also recommends that if you have a family member in extended care who can't communicate, make sure the nursing home administration knows your wishes.

"Be very forceful in communicating whether you want to be notified if there is a change of condition and they'll be transporting your relative somewhere, whether it's day or night," said Ward. "Advance directives are always helpful, but I've seen patients with these and sometimes the dots don't get connected."

Also remember the patient's will might come into play. Ward's own mother fell and fractured her leg, but she didn't want the hospital to "bother" her daughter, the director of an emergency room. "It was only when they took her to surgery that she allowed them to call me and even then she wouldn't give up my phone number," Ward said. "So sometimes the patient makes the decision. You have to balance it out."

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For more information, visit the Web site www.nokep.org.

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