



# Institute for Community Health

A collaboration of the Cambridge Health Alliance, Mount Auburn Hospital, and Partners Healthcare

## 2007 AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

### **Universal access: Using focus groups to shape local and regional public health emergency preparedness planning around special needs populations.**

*Bryan Hall, MS; Charles K.T. Ishikawa, MSPH; Dawn Sibor, MEd; and Justeen Hyde, PhD.*

Public health officials have come under increasing pressure to join traditional first responders like fire and police in developing comprehensive emergency preparedness, response, and recovery plans in the event of a major public health emergency, such as flu pandemic or bioterrorism event. Challenges include how to make these plans and services accessible and responsive to special needs populations, such as non-English speaking populations, the elderly, and those with vision, hearing, cognitive, physical and other impairments. In 2006, the Brookline, MA Health Department, a member of the 27-community Emergency Preparedness Region 4b, conducted a series of five community focus groups with members from various special needs populations and their service providers. The goal was to identify effective strategies for enhancing the accessibility of local emergency services in the event of an emergency that either required evacuation or required sheltering in place. This presentation will explore the unique methodologies behind conducting focus groups with special needs populations. This presentation will also focus on key lessons learned and the far reaching impacts these focus groups have had on emergency planning activities for other local health departments and the larger regional structure. Particular attention will be paid toward the important role personal emergency preparedness planning can play for special needs populations and the concept of "universal design", a product, service, and environment design approach which is inherently attentive to the needs of vulnerable and special needs populations, yet flexible enough to successfully accommodate the majority of people.