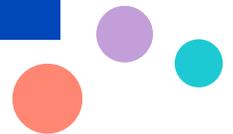




AUTISM FAMILY STORM SURVEY

Preparation and readiness survey findings of autism families from across Lee County.

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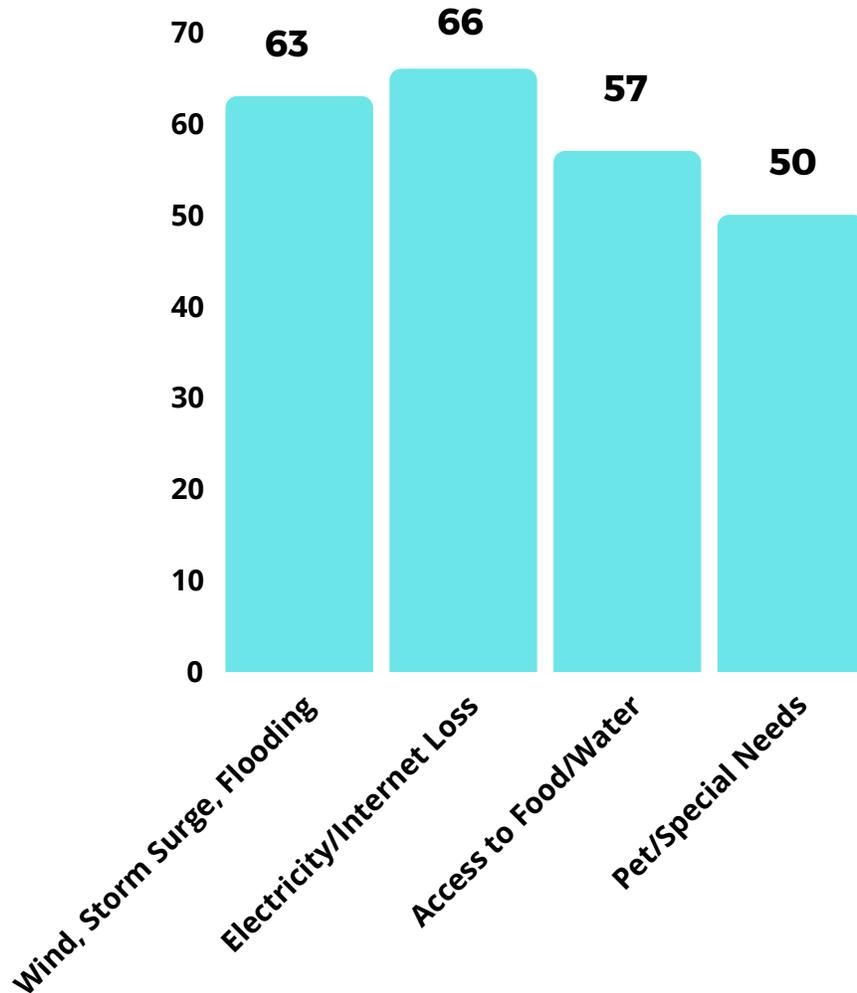
Since Hurricane Ian hit SWFL in 2022, there has been growing interest in hurricane preparedness and evacuation tendencies among residents of Lee County, Florida. Family Initiative, a regional nonprofit that supports individuals and families affected by autism, is especially interested in how to better communicate with, prepare, and respond to those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) before and after an emergency like a major hurricane.

To gain a fuller understanding of the challenges faced by those with ASD and their caregivers, Family Initiative recently partnered with Lee County government officials and stakeholders to distribute the Lee County/Family Initiative Autism Hurricane Response and Recovery Survey. This report briefly summarizes and highlights the survey data collected from hundreds of participants across Lee County. The survey sought to understand the factors influencing evacuation decisions, preparedness levels, information sources, and critical needs post-hurricane.

Insights gathered from this survey highlight the complex considerations ASD residents face when making evacuation decisions, preparing for a unique range of needs, and anticipating the ongoing array of recovery challenges after severe weather events. This summary presents key findings to enhance emergency management strategies and resilience initiatives at Family Initiative, with partner organizations and in Lee County.

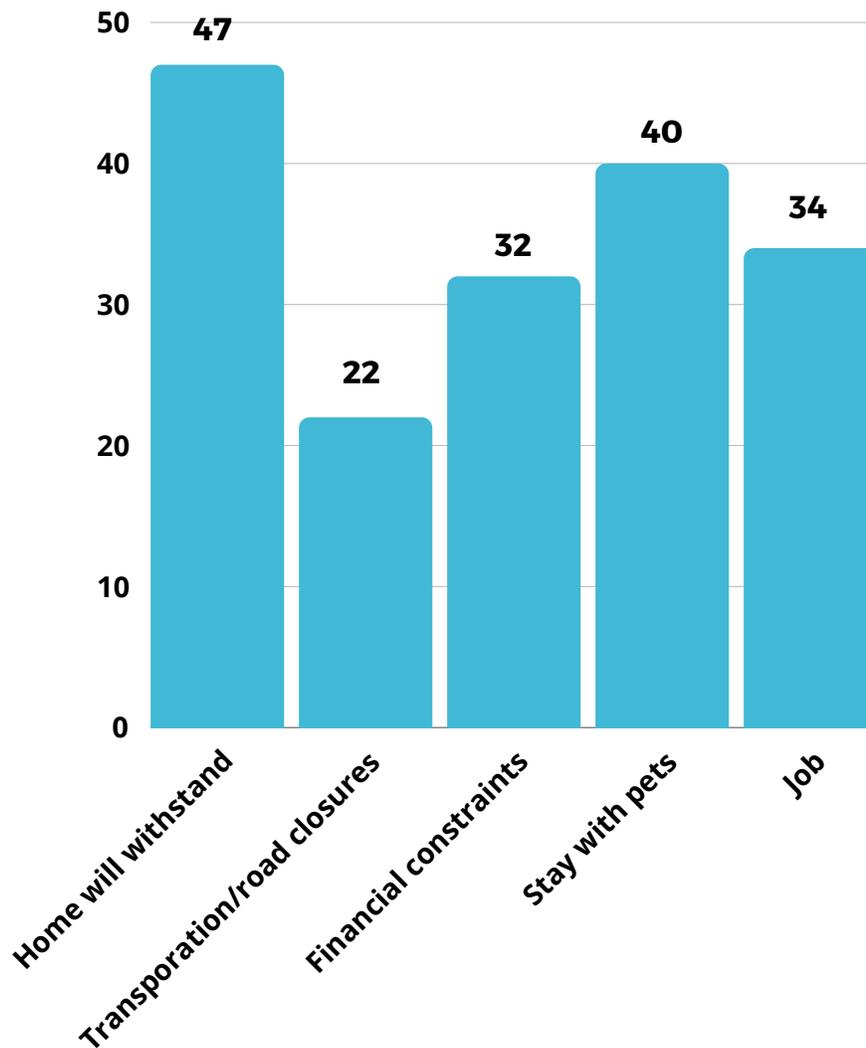
Evacuating vs. Sheltering

68.63% of families surveyed plan to evacuate for a **Category 5** storm. **58.82%** for a **Category 4** storm and **33.33%** for a **Category 3** storm.



The table above represents the reasons considered when families are determining if they should evacuate. Almost 50% are concerned about the unique needs of their child or family member. Up to 68% of families plan to stay in Lee County or SWFL depending on the severity of storm and prefer to stay with friends or relatives due to financial constraints. Fifty one percent of families reported they are unsure of how their child will be treated in a public shelter and only 10% of families surveyed were aware of the special needs shelters in Lee County.

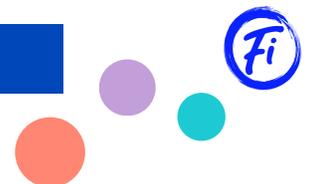




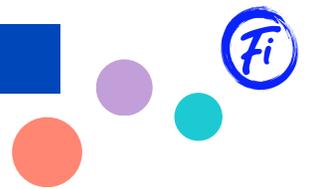
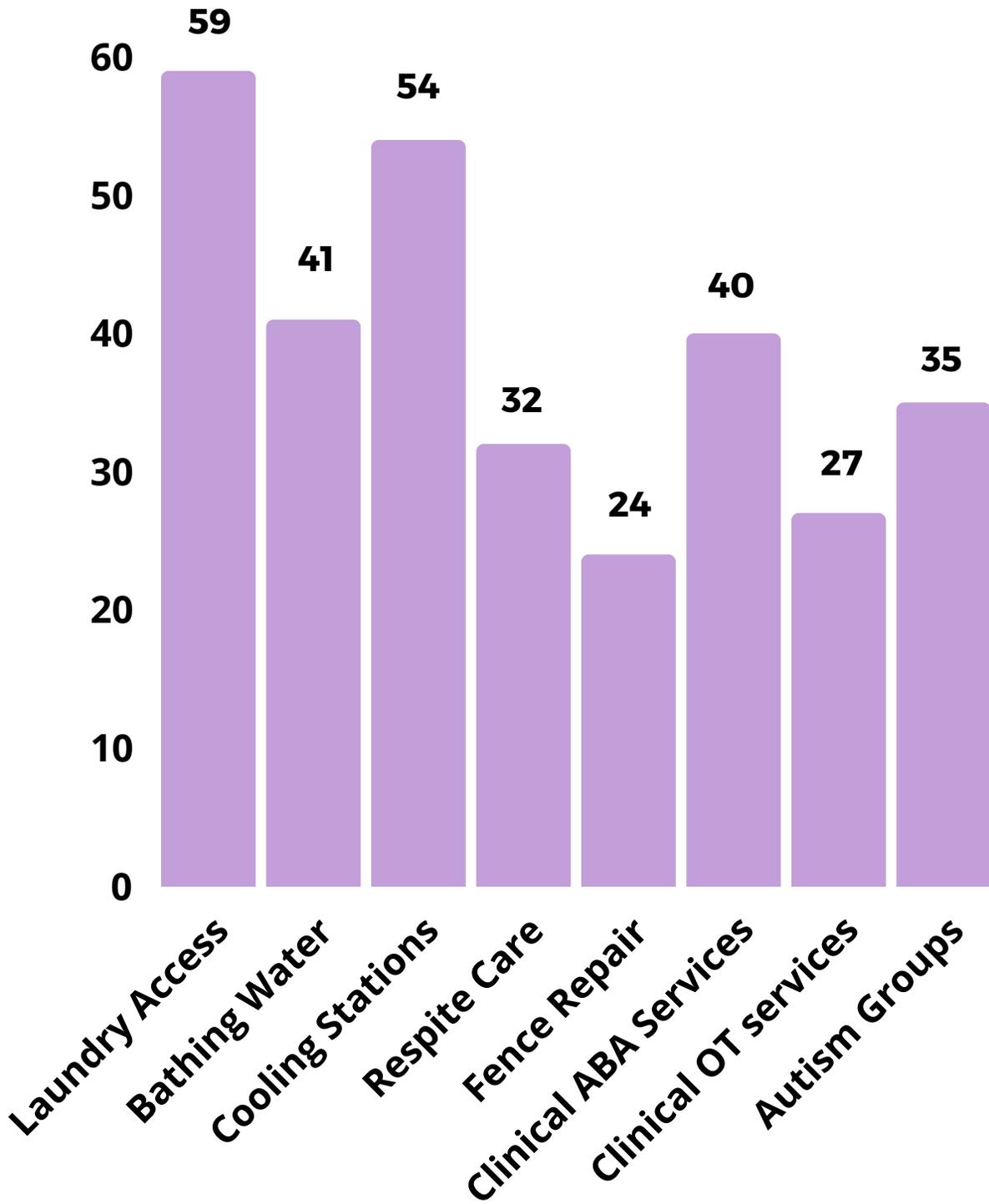
The figure above indicates reasons families prefer to **shelter in place**. Almost 50% feel as if their home can sustain the wind or water damage, and almost 40% want to keep their pets with them. A third of respondents indicated they had to stay due to their current employment.

Post Storm Needs

Many post storm needs are similar to most families in the region however, there are needs unique to the ASD community. These include factors related to medical issues that require access to laundry services or cooling areas as well as factors related to safety such as immediate repair of fencing to prevent elopement and respite care or services so families are able to focus on repairs while knowing their child is safely supervised. Families surveyed also expressed the importance of resuming medically necessary clinical services as quickly as possible to prevent regression for their child.



Post Storm Needs



Summary and Next Steps

Family Initiative's Autism Family Storm Survey revealed key findings to help our community better prepare to support the autism community. As the prevalence of autism continues to increase, these findings will help remain a priority across SWFL.

Most notable is that Autism families do not have the financial means to evacuate and very few are aware of the special needs or pet friendly shelters. Additionally, recovery needs of autism families are slightly different. Families need quicker access to laundry facilities and cooling stations due medical concerns. Additional needs include safety concerns for children.

Recommended action steps include:

1. Increased communication: targeted marketing to ensure autism families are aware of resources available such as pet friendly shelters, special needs shelters, pre-hurricane preparedness distributions, workshops on preparing hurricane kits.
2. Shelter accommodations: Family Initiative to partner with Lee County to provide training to shelter staff, assist in creating sensory areas, and act as a resource to any ASD families who choose to shelter. Family Initiative is working to create a shelter for ASD families.
3. Post storm preparedness: Collaborate to identify resources pre-storm to assist with safety needs of families. Identify resources for families who need specialized food items, cooling stations, laundry access.
4. Family Initiative Sensory Trailer: Utilize existing sensory trailer to provide cooling stations and internet access to families.
5. Explore the development of a special needs resiliency hub for Lee County.

Family Initiative is incredibly grateful for the tremendous partnership and ongoing collaboration with Lee County Government. Our community has demonstrated its willingness to be a leader in building capacity and support for the autism community. We look forward to continued innovation and success moving forward.

