

SAFEGUARDING AMERICA'S SENIORS: WHAT WE CAN DO TO PREPARE FOR NATIONAL EMERGENCIES

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
UNITED STATES SENATE



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INTRODUCTION

Last September, our nation reeled from the tragic and shameful images of seniors abandoned during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We must never again leave our parents and grandparents to face an emergency alone.

This report compiles the recommendations made to the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging during and following the hearing, "Caring for Seniors in a National Emergency: Can We Do Better?," held on May 18, 2006. The report does not point fingers for past tragedies; it looks forward. Hurricane season is an annual event, the threat of terrorism remains, and the potential for an avian flu pandemic looms. We all agree, we let our seniors down after Hurricane Katrina. But, as sorry as we all are, are we any more prepared for the next hurricane, attack, or disaster?

We know now that one-size-fits-all emergency plans are of little use to seniors, especially those who depend on other for assistance in their daily lives. When we plan for emergencies, we must also plan for the unique challenges of keeping seniors safe.

Our lack of preparation for seniors after last summer's hurricane's—and the terrible price we paid in lives and suffering—was a national tragedy. That tragedy is compounded if we ignore the painful lessons of the past. We need specific plans, programs, and information for seniors facing emergencies.

This report is intended to inform decision makers on all levels—Federal, State and local emergency planners, first responders, law enforcement, advocates, seniors, and their families and friends. We believe all will find information they can use to prepare to care for seniors when the next emergency occurs.

BACKGROUND

The National Preparedness System (NPS), as overseen by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), coordinates operations and priorities of homeland security officials, emergency managers, and first responders. NPS has developed six basic documents to guide emergency planning. These documents set goals and standards for Federal, State and local governments to meet in order to properly protect our citizens during a national emergency.

NPS' guidance is a good first step; however, it is important to note that not one single office within DHS is solely dedicated to the protection of seniors. DHS has issued only limited guidance to State and local emergency planners that specifically deals with sen-

iors' needs—a questionable strategy in the face of seventy-seven million baby boomers on the cusp of retirement.

The structure of and responsibility for emergency management varies greatly among State and local governments. That is why it is imperative for the federal government to provide strong leadership in protecting seniors. We must coordinate all efforts—federal, state and local—to ensure that our most vulnerable populations are protected.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were culled from testimony provided to the Committee in preparation for its May 18, 2006 hearing examining emergency preparedness issues for seniors. They do not necessarily represent the perspectives of the Committee or any of its members, but serve as a valuable starting point in discussing how we, as a nation, can better protect our seniors in the event of a national disaster.

PLANNING

- Emergency planners should involve social service providers, such as Meals on Wheels programs, in the planning process. These providers' transportation resources could be used to evacuate many seniors on voluntary registries administered by local governments. These providers have expertise and ongoing contact with clients who face transportation obstacles, and are familiar with their day-to-day and non-emergency needs.

- Plans should clearly articulate the responsibilities of all agencies in evacuating transportation-disadvantaged populations, and spell out the methods and coordination of evacuations. This plan should detail how local and state emergency management, and transit agencies should work together to evacuate transportation-disadvantaged people. Emergency management officials stated that this level of coordination enabled them to successfully conduct several evacuations in the past.

- Federal, State and local planners should involve gerontologists (geriatricians, geriatric nurse practitioners, geriatric social workers, etc.) in all aspects of emergency preparedness and care delivery. Gerontologists should be involved in the training of frontline workers and other first responders about frail adults' unique needs.

- The federal government should develop a simple, inexpensive, cohesive, integrated and efficient tracking system for seniors and other vulnerable adults that can be employed at the state and local levels.

- The federal government should select an existing agency, such as the Department of Transportation, to be the primary federal agency responsible for developing the capability to conduct mass evacuations.

- DHS should require that state and local governments conduct evacuation planning and exercises as a condition for receiving Homeland Security grants.

- DHS, in coordination with the states, should plan, train and exercise for evacuations, including exercises that incorporate those populations that do not have the means to evacuate.

- Ongoing federal funding is needed for existing programs to continue to plan for national emergencies. Federal funding is also needed to provide the infrastructure to accommodate the needs of the elderly in disasters.

- Congress should consider restoring funding to the geriatrics health professions programs, which includes the Geriatrics Education Centers (GECs). The GECs are at the forefront of disaster preparedness and the elderly, having prepared the lead, national curriculum in this area.

- State and local planners should designate separate shelter areas in advance for the elderly and other vulnerable adults. Seniors without family members or advocates should be grouped in shelter sites so that they can be attended to by medical personnel and volunteers to help them with their special needs.

- Metropolitan areas should revisit their building codes and develop strategies to strengthen their infrastructures. Areas prone to disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires or flooding should review and strengthen building codes specific to the disasters most likely to occur in their particular area. Buildings known to specifically house seniors should be focused on during these reviews.

TRAINING

- Train all first responders and law enforcement agents about the unique needs of the elderly in the event of a national emergency or disaster.

- Conduct regular exercises of emergency response plans in order to test coordination between agencies involved in evacuations.

- Encourage citizens who have special needs to voluntarily register with their local emergency management agency. Train all appropriate parties how to implement and use voluntary registries before, during and after an emergency. According to emergency management officials, in several recent evacuations, voluntary registries assisted emergency personnel in efficiently evacuating transportation-disadvantaged populations.

- Involve region-specific social services, medical and public health resources, volunteers, and facilities in pre-event planning and training for elders and vulnerable adults.

- Train first responders and law enforcement officers on how to implement senior specific triage tools.

- Develop coordinated regional plans for evacuations of residents of long-term care facilities and for homebound seniors. These regional plans should be reviewed periodically and incorporated into regular training exercises, so that long-term care facilities and isolated seniors are appropriately prioritized in the event of an emergency.

SENIOR EDUCATION

The following information should be made available to seniors to better prepare themselves for future national disasters.

- It is always better to prepare for a disaster too early than too late. Take the possibility of a disaster seriously; many are sudden and have no warning.

- Become part of a network of people to check on your welfare in the event of a disaster. Many towns are establishing registries so that emergency workers can locate high risk and high needs people, and check on those who might not have anyone else to check on them. If you need medical assistance, teach those who will come to check on you any necessary equipment operations. A network of friends or neighbors would work as well. This is to ensure that when a disaster happens, everyone is accounted for and taken care of.

- Become informed as to what kind of disasters are common in your community, state, or region. Physical geographic factors are not the only factors to take into account. Proximity to large cities, power plants, military bases, etc. are sources of disasters as well.

- There are several steps to take that will prepare you for *any* disaster:

Make sure that you have access to communication—many emergency notification are broadcast on the television or radio.

Assemble a disaster supply kit, complete with medical and general supplies:

- Battery-powered radio and flashlight; including extra batteries for each

- Clothing, rain, gear, and sturdy comfortable shoes

- Blanket or sleeping bag

- Extra car and house keys

- Whistle in case you need to attract attention

- Cash, credit cards and loose change

- Personal hygiene supplies

- Emergency phone numbers as well as phone numbers of relatives, friends, your doctor, and insurance company

- Sealed supplies of water

- Plan transportation that will accommodate any mobility needs you might have in the event of an evacuation. Always try to travel with others.

- Plan a safe place in your home where you can wait during an emergency if so instructed.

- In the event of a fire, plan two escape routes out of each room. If you cannot use stairways, make special arrangements for help in advance. Never use elevators. Test your smoke detector battery regularly.

- In case of an earthquake or other disaster, you should have things securely anchored in your home, keeping heavy things off of top shelves to prevent injury. Have personal records in fireproof, watertight containers.

- Even if you do have a registry or network that will check on you, you should still be prepared to support yourself for up to 72 hours without outside help.

- In the event of an evacuation:

- Travel with others if at all possible.

- Wear appropriate clothing and sturdy shoes.

- Take your Disaster Supplies Kit.

- Lock your home.

- Use the travel routes specified or special assistance provided by local officials. Don't take any short cuts; they may be unsafe.

- Notify shelter authorities of any needs you may have.

CONCLUSION

When the next national emergency strikes—whether it's a hurricane, terrorist attack or a public health threat—we need to make sure no senior is left behind.

It's clear that the Federal government still has a lot of work to do. We need to make sure that seniors know how to prepare themselves and who to turn to for help. All levels of government need to plan, train and practice *now* so we can respond to seniors in a future emergency.

We hope that you will find these recommendations helpful and act immediately to make sure seniors never fall through the cracks again.

