

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing
“Preparing Early, Acting Quickly: Meeting the Needs of Older Americans During a Disaster”
October 5, 2005

Good morning and welcome to all.

Today’s hearing, “Preparing Early, Acting Quickly: Meeting the Needs of Older Americans During a Disaster” is one of the most important hearings this Committee will hold.

Over the last several weeks, we in Congress have devoted much of our time to helping our fellow Americans who have been displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita get back on their feet. We have also begun the long process of rebuilding those areas of our Gulf region that have been so ravaged by these terrible storms.

Now that this work is underway, we must begin to examine the preparedness of our federal, state and local governments to deal with such disasters in the future.

As we will hear from our witnesses, older Americans have special needs that make them particularly vulnerable during an emergency. Today’s hearing will seek to determine what those needs are, and how those who are charged with formulating our nation’s emergency response plans can incorporate best practices so these concerns are specifically addressed.

A key lesson learned in the aftermath of the recent hurricanes is that government at all levels must do more to ensure the health and safety of older Americans during a disaster. Many in this population are extremely vulnerable and it is the government’s responsibility to ensure that adequate steps have been taken to identify those in need, evacuate them to safety and provide appropriate care once displaced.

There is no doubt that this poses a daunting challenge, but as we will hear today many states, localities and provider groups have instituted outstanding systems that have proven effective. I hope the testimony today from our distinguished witnesses allows this Committee to learn about best practices in disaster preparedness and enables us to move forward with concrete recommendations for how best to protect our most vulnerable citizens during emergencies.

As we have learned, once a disaster strikes it is too late to begin deciding the appropriate course of action. Rather, we must be prepared well before a crisis is upon us in order to give our responders the best opportunity to identify those most at risk and get them to safety.

As we will hear from our witnesses, no two older persons are alike. The diversity of need is vast – ranging from those who are cared for in a nursing home or hospital, to an active person living on their own and still able to drive. However, when a disaster strikes all are vulnerable and extra care must be taken to ensure that older persons are able to get out of harms way.

As members of this Committee I believe we are protectors of older Americans, charged with ensuring that our government is taking appropriate care of those in need. Therefore, as we contemplate policies that improve our country's disaster preparation and response we must consider the special needs of this population, namely :

- How do we identify people who have health or mobility challenges who cannot evacuate on their own;
- How do we safely transport people with various levels of health care needs out of an impacted area;
- How do we identify or create special-needs shelters;
- How do we ensure emergency medications are available and accessible;
- How do we provide meals for people with special dietary needs;
- How do we provide personal care aides for those who are unable to care for themselves; and
- How do we assess the long term needs of older persons and provide assistance in making arrangements for appropriate care?

As we listen to the testimony of our witnesses today, we will hear details about the considerable work they have done in their communities to address these important concerns. All provide some excellent examples of the positive results that can be achieved with thorough planning and early preparedness.

Large-scale natural disasters like the hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast stretch our federal, state and local response capabilities to their absolute limits. I am hopeful today's witnesses will give our Committee members valuable insight on the special needs of older Americans to help us ensure that no lives are needlessly lost during future emergencies.

I thank all of you for coming to share your expertise and look forward to your comments.

Thank you.