

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl – Special Committee on Aging – 10/05/05
“Preparing Early, Acting Quickly: Meeting the Needs of Older Americans During a
Disaster”

We thank our Chairman, Gordon Smith, for holding this hearing on emergency preparedness planning for seniors, and for his leadership on this and countless other important issues facing older Americans.

Emergency preparedness planning is a challenge under any circumstance. Preparing for the unique needs of the elderly requires even greater diligence and resolve. As we have seen in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, disasters have an exaggerated effect on seniors, in particular those who depend on others for assistance in their daily lives. The ongoing provision of evacuation transportation, food, medication and shelter all become life and death matters.

This does not even speak to the tragedies we recently witnessed in the abandonment of the disabled and elderly in nursing homes, hospitals and other care facilities- the institutions which we would assume would be most vigilant in emergency preparedness and caring for our most vulnerable. In this regard, I have asked the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services to conduct a thorough investigation into federally mandated evacuation plans for nursing homes and hospitals to determine the adequacy and shortcomings of those plans in place.

As we have learned from past disasters and attacks, a multidisciplinary approach on the federal, state and local levels is needed to properly guarantee that the needs of our seniors are addressed. Today, the Committee will hear from a panel of experts who will tell us just how to do this. We look forward to hearing from and working with them to ensure that in the face of future disasters, our seniors remain healthy, safe and secure.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.