

U.S. Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL)
Aging Committee Hearing on Emergency Preparedness
Wednesday, June 24th, 2009, 10:30 am

Welcome Chairman Kohl and members of the committee. I want to first thank our witnesses for joining us as we discuss how emergency preparedness relates to seniors and those seniors living with special needs. I'm looking forward to hearing perspectives from some of our federal, state, and local partners about the unique needs of elderly Americans to better prepare for when disaster strikes.

As we begin the 2009 hurricane season, I am reminded how older Americans are often the hardest hit when Mother Nature is at her worst. A prime example of this occurred during Hurricane Katrina, where nearly half of all storm-related deaths involved residents 75 years and older, and the average age for fatalities was 69. In hurricanes and other disasters, no American should be endangered by virtue of their age, living situation, or physical capabilities.

As we have learned, threats vary from state to state and region to region. Whether it is a flood, blizzard, earthquake, fire, or even a pandemic, emergency responders at every level ought to be prepared to assist our most vulnerable citizens.

We know from past experiences with natural or manmade disasters that all Americans - especially those with special needs - suffer when there is a lack of preparation, information, and coordination. That is why we as public servants have the responsibility to help inform the general public about the value of being personally prepared.

For seniors and seniors living with special needs, this includes having something as simple as a communications plan, an emergency kit, an extra pair of reading glasses, or even a hearing aide. Such a preparation may mean the difference between life or death.

Emergency responders in my home state of Florida have taken significant steps to address the unique needs of seniors. It's not an overstatement to say that our model can serve as a model for our nation.

One innovation sets up the Incident Command Center model in nursing homes. This goes a long way in ensuring nursing home employees are trained in emergency preparedness procedures and can coordinate a response in the event of an emergency.

It will also help to avoid mistakes like those made during Hurricane Katrina, where many long-term care providers were simply untrained and unprepared.

Another concern has been what to do for seniors in the event of a national pandemic. We have all read about the H1N1 Swine flu outbreak. Although the elderly were not at great risk, we must be prepared for the upcoming flu season where seniors are among the most vulnerable along with possibility of the return of a mutated H1N1 flu strain.

In many instances during pandemics, caregivers may be more vulnerable to the flu than patients, so we must ask ourselves, how do we ensure there are enough doctors, nurses, aides and other medical personnel in the event these caregivers are infected?

Most seniors do not receive formal care in their homes, communities, or in 24-hour facilities. For these elderly and those living at home and in need of long-term care, the State Units on Aging and Area Agencies on Aging are invaluable.

Area Agencies and State Units actively seek to reach all seniors to help them plan and prepare for a natural disaster. They are the key connector to the array of government and private entities offering seniors services and recovery before, during, and after a disaster. In Florida, Area

Agencies are on the forefront of innovation in planning, preparing, and responding to disasters and emergencies.

I am proud to note that Florida's Department of Elder Affairs is seen as model in disaster response and recovery throughout the country and is often consulted by other State Units on Aging for guidance and expertise.

Florida has the highest proportion of elderly of any state and also a high incidence of disasters and emergencies, so it is expected that Florida would have a first-rate preparedness and response system. But each year new threats emerge as old threats largely remain.

We must not forget the special needs of our seniors residing in any state facing a natural, manmade, or public health emergencies.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us today and I look forward to hearing your thoughts and ideas on innovations and challenges for emergency preparedness and response for seniors across the nation.

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Today we have with us five witnesses to speak about emergency preparedness, aging and aging with special needs. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on general and special need preparations and your recommendations for increasing the safety of all Americans through targeted personal and collaborative efforts.

First we have Dr. Richard E. Besser, M.D., Director of the Coordinating Office for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dr. Besser was the acting CDC Director during the recent H1N1 influenza outbreak. His current office is charged with protection for the nation from all threats to the public's health.

Next is Doug Beach, Secretary for the Florida Department of Elder Affairs. On February 13, 2007, Governor Charlie Crist appointed Dr. Beach as the Secretary of the Florida Department of Elder Affairs. Secretary Beach has worked in the aging network for more than 12 years most recently serving as the Chief Executive Officer of the Senior Resource Alliance (the Area Agency on Aging of Central Florida, Inc.) a planning, policy and resource agency serving Florida's seniors 60 years of age and older in Brevard, Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties.

LuMarie Polivka-West is Senior Vice President of Policy at the Florida Health Care Association. Ms. Polivka-West is responsible for the planning and implementation of long-term care related policies and programs and staffing the Quality Credentialing Program and serves as the Principal Investigator for the John A. Hartford Foundation Disaster Preparedness grant.

Sandy Markwood is the Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

She has more than 30 years experience in the development and delivery of aging, health, human services, housing and transportation programs in counties and cities across the nation.

Timothy W. Manning is the Deputy Administrator, National Preparedness Directorate, for the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Prior to FEMA, Mr. Manning served as the Director of the New Mexico Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, and Homeland Security Advisor to the Governor.