

Opening Statement
Senator Susan Collins
“Disaster Preparedness and Response: The Special Needs of Older Americans”
September 20, 2017

Good morning. Recently, Hurricanes Harvey and Irma left a path of destruction along the Gulf Coast of Texas, across Florida, and throughout the Caribbean. Homes, businesses, and entire communities were destroyed, and lives were lost.

Days after Irma, we learned the tragic news that eight seniors, ranging in age from 71 to 99, died in a Florida nursing home that lacked air conditioning because the power had been knocked out. One press account described the facility as a “death trap”, because the elderly are particularly susceptible to heat related illnesses. Last month, this photo of residents of an assisted living facility in Texas who were trapped in waist-deep water went viral.

As these recent disasters make clear, older Americans are particularly vulnerable before, during, and even after a storm. In fact, when Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast 12 years ago, more than half of those who died were seniors.

As then-Chair of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, along with Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, I led a bipartisan investigation into the response to Hurricane Katrina at the federal, state and local levels. Our investigation, which resulted in this extensive – some would say weighty – report, revealed many weaknesses in our nation’s emergency response system. Although I doubt many people read the whole report, it does have an excellent summary that I was just discussing with the chief, and it was evident to me in rereading it that we learned many of the lessons of Katrina, but we still have a long ways to go. One of the weaknesses in our nation’s emergency response system included the failure on the part of all levels of government to plan and provide for the timely and effective evacuation of our most vulnerable seniors. Since then, we have expanded our efforts to improve emergency preparedness and response across the entire country, and we have emphasized the protection of the most vulnerable.

Meanwhile, Mother Nature continues to unleash her fury. Today, even as we meet, yet another hurricane – Maria – is battering a region still struggling to recover and is expected to hit Puerto Rico particularly hard.

This morning, we will discuss how our federal, state and local emergency response efforts have been critical in limiting the scope of these recent tragedies and we will identify where more work is still needed. On the positive side, improvements in emergency response efforts at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services have helped to identify those seniors who required relocation in order to maintain their dialysis. I was talking with the head of CMS just yesterday about this, but she said one of the problems was that the demand was so great that people were not able to have complete dialysis. They were able to be hooked up to the machines for two hours when they needed a far longer period of time, but the demand was such that they were just trying to maintain people. In addition, local emergency response teams implemented strategies to identify those most in need and provided designated shelters that offered necessary medical care and support.

But that tragically was not always the case. The lack of electrical power apparently contributed to the death of those seniors in the nursing home and to the worsening health condition of others, suggesting a troubling lack of preparedness in some health care centers. While we have made many strides since Hurricane Katrina 12 years ago, we must ask ourselves: can we better protect the most vulnerable members of our communities? What gaps exist that could jeopardize lives in the next catastrophe, whether it's a storm, earthquake or some other unanticipated event? We should not have to wait for the next Irene, Sandy, Harvey, Irma, or unnamed catastrophe to strike.

Today, we will discuss concrete solutions to protect and stabilize vulnerable seniors, from maintaining necessary resources and connections during emergencies to relocating and returning to safe and secure homes during the recovery period. We will consider the challenges of making the correct choices of whether it is better to shelter people in place or evacuate and relocate. And as I have looked more into this issue, I have learned this is often a very difficult decision to make, particularly if you are dealing with people with some sort of dementia.

Just one day after Hurricane Irma slammed much of Florida, a CNN reporter waded about a mile in waist-deep water – contaminated with oil and garbage - to knock on the door of a mobile home in Bonita Springs. He had been told that an elderly couple lived inside, and that they did not heed the warnings of local and state officials to leave prior to the storm. Inside this mobile home, which was now surrounded by water, lived an 88-year-old woman and her 93-year-old husband who suffered with Parkinson's disease and diabetes. When this reporter asked the woman why they didn't evacuate, the woman simply replied – “we have everything we need here, he has his medications, it's just easier.”

Now I am most grateful this couple was found safe, but to me this story illustrates how we must expand our efforts to protect vulnerable seniors, not only those who are living in facilities, such as an assisted living or long term care facilities, but, instead, remain in their own homes. For many of these seniors, evacuation is not as easy as packing a bag and jumping into a car. They might not be able to drive for example. Some of these homebound older adults are alone and frail. They may suffer from diseases, and many of them have lived in their homes for so long that they just do not want to leave it behind and are fearful for what would happen if they leave.

Let me conclude by offering my condolences to all those who have experienced loss as a result of these violent hurricanes. My heart goes out to all of those who are suffering and now face the considerable challenges in the weeks and months ahead.

I also want to extend my gratitude to the first responders, including the volunteers such as the medical team from Maine, and everyone who has reached out to help a neighbor in need – even as, in so many cases, they too are dealing with the devastation caused by these terrible storms. While we can and must continue to improve our emergency response so that the tragic deaths in the Florida nursing home do not happen in the future, we should not overlook the heroic actions of so many.

I want to thank our witnesses for being with us today and I am delighted recognize the ranking member Senator Casey.