



**TESTIMONY OF
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ON BEHALF OF
AARP**

**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE, AND RECOVERY
ON**

**“SUPPORTING UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES
IN
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT”**

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Good morning, Chairman Demings, Ranking Member Cammack, and members of the House Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. I am Denise Bottcher, State Director for AARP Louisiana. AARP welcomes this opportunity to address the impact of increasingly frequent disasters on our nation's older adults and to recommend steps that can be taken to avert or mitigate the harm and to aid recovery.

Impact of Disasters on Older Adults

Tragically, older adults represent the majority of those who perish in disasters. Such was the case in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where people age 75 and older accounted for over half of lives lost – despite being only six percent of the New Orleans population. Similarly, when Hurricane Sandy hit the New York Tri-State area several years later, nearly half of the deceased were estimated to be 65 or older. Even higher shares of death among older adults have occurred in more recent disasters. Of those who died in the 2018 Camp Fire in California, 85 percent were age 60 or older. And in last year's Texas winter storm, 60 percent of deaths were persons over age 60. Further, due to systemic societal inequities, a disproportionate share of older disaster victims are racial and ethnic minorities.

These tragic outcomes are not inevitable. Agencies and communities that possess a clear understanding of the unique needs of older adults in disaster events, including an understanding of the impact of extreme weather on the health and well-being of older adults, are better equipped to keep them safe. For several years, AARP has worked through our state offices and our nationwide channels both to promote a better understanding of older adults and their needs related to disasters and to educate older adults and their families in the hopes of creating truly age-friendly, resilient communities.

Towards this end, we recently released a publication that provides guidance to local and state leaders on how to create a more resilient future that puts the needs of older adults at the forefront. The AARP Disaster Resilience Tool Kit, developed together with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), explores the unique needs of older adults when disaster strikes, including the impacts of extreme heat. Due to their often-weakened cardiovascular systems, a lower ability to reduce body temperature through sweat, and complications arising from preexisting medical conditions, the impact of heat on older adults is particularly acute. Furthermore, extreme heat poses greater challenges for those who live on fixed incomes and are unable to easily afford to cool their homes or who lack transportation to cooling centers. Heat impacts are further exacerbated for people whose neighborhood lacks the cooling effect of trees, who live in older manufactured homes, who are socially disconnected from neighbors or caregivers who can monitor their condition, or who are unhoused.

Other types of disasters and public health emergencies are no less dangerous. Sadly, flooding threatens coastal areas where seniors have chosen to live or are being cared for. In fact, coastal regions saw an 89 percent increase in the number of residents age 65 or older between 1970 and 2010. One assessment predicts that two out of every three of beds in Florida nursing homes and assisted living facilities are located in areas that will likely experience occasional or frequent flooding over the next three decades.¹

As the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation, its impact has been especially deadly for older adults, particularly residents of nursing homes and other long-term care facilities. Far too often, state and local emergency planning drills and efforts overlook older adults and people with disabilities who reside in

¹ AARP Disaster Resilience Tool Kit, July 2022, p. 10. <https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/tool-kits-resources/info-2022/aarp-disaster-resilience-tool-kit-download.html> .

nursing homes or other facilities, or who receive home and community-based services, as well as the staff who care for them, and their family caregivers. A failure to include these individuals in advance planning, communications, and drills costs lives. Over the years, AARP has provided comments on Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' proposed regulations regarding emergency preparedness and nursing homes participating in Medicare and Medicaid.

Of course, the vast majority of older adults do not live in congregate facilities. Less than four percent of older adults live in nursing homes or assisted living facilities. Many millions more live independently in their homes, often alone. Individuals who remain at home through disaster events, either by choice or under duress, confront the risks of power outages, the shortage of food and prescription medicines, and interrupted medical care or in-home caregiving support. Many older adults who might want to evacuate out of harm's way are impeded from doing so by a variety of circumstances, such as a lack of transportation, savings, and access to information. Others may be reluctant to retreat to cooling centers or shelters because of a reliance on in-home medical equipment, in-home care, or even pets. Once the immediate danger has passed, older adults continue to face threats as targets of fraudulent rebuilding schemes in the chaos of the recovery phase. They also face challenges in accessing federal relief due to a lack of information, technology, and broadband.

Disasters also endanger the financial security of older homeowners, many of whom rely upon the equity in their home as their largest source of savings. This is particularly true for those in high-risk areas, who frequently cannot afford increased insurance costs on their fixed incomes – if insurance is even available to them. The cost of rebuilding and recovery may be out of reach for those who lack adequate savings, including the 46 percent of people over 50 who have no emergency savings.²

AARP Responses

AARP is dedicated to supporting older adults' well-being. We have contributed to disaster relief efforts through our AARP Foundation since 2010, and many of our 53 state offices have been at the forefront of preparedness and education efforts over the years. For example, the AARP New York state office has helped amplify disaster response messaging to reach older New Yorkers. The office also coordinated disaster philanthropy after Hurricane Sandy, and again most recently after the severe flooding in Brooklyn and the Bronx as a result of Hurricane Ida. In Florida and Louisiana, disaster preparedness is now a year-round topic of conversation and education among AARP members. Through public service announcements and targeted media, our state offices work diligently to reach our members to encourage preparedness, combat contractor fraud and promote home generator safety. Regrettably, the Government Accountability Office found in 2019 that many older individuals and persons with disabilities may have faced challenges registering for and receiving assistance from FEMA and its nonfederal partners (such as state, territorial, and local emergency managers).³ Following a disaster, and in close coordination with emergency responders, AARP works to connect older adults to recovery resources.

In North Carolina, AARP used our Hub Dialer volunteer call program to call veterans in the state to offer a free Emergency Go Bag. And AARP regularly leads programming through Rural Free Delivery (RFD) TV to educate members in remote and rural areas about how to better prepare for disasters.⁴

² AARP Public Policy Institute, "Unlocking the Potential of Emergency Savings" online article, October 19, 2020. <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/info-2019/unlocking-the-potential-of-emergency-savings-accounts.html>.

³ U. S. Government Accountability Office, "Disaster Assistance: FEMA Action Needed to Better Support Individuals Who Are Older or Have Disabilities," May 2019.

⁴ AARP, "Preparing for Any Disaster" September 2021, <https://states.aarp.org/preparing-for-any-emergency-september-2021>

In recent years, however, more AARP state offices have seen the need to engage in mitigation and resilience efforts, noting the disproportionate impacts of disasters on older adults. For example, AARP Texas fought for stronger protections for medically-needy Texans dependent on electricity following Winter Storm Uri in 2021. Uri killed 146 Texans over 60 years of age, most of them from hypothermia. The protections include notification ahead of losing power, as well as requirements that backup power generation be in place for all long-term care facilities. Similarly, after 12 South Florida nursing home residents died in 2017 due to a prolonged power outage after Hurricane Irma, AARP Florida pushed for enforcement of a state law requiring nursing homes and assisted living facilities to have emergency backup power.

The Louisiana Experience

Turning to my home state, as we approach the height of hurricane season – mid-August through September – AARP Louisiana is ramping up its education and outreach to older adults.

My team and I recently returned from a trip to Southwest Louisiana where we met with pastors to discuss their communities' recovery from the devastating hurricane season of 2020. We learned that rebuilding was slow –particularly for those on fixed incomes with few financial resources. For older adults, navigating the often complex federal and state recovery assets is a daunting task made more difficult when offered virtually or online. The digital literacy gap for older adults is wide. That is why my team is working with LACONNECT – the Governor's Office of Broadband and Connectivity—to explore solutions to high-speed access and digital equity in times of disaster. But while we are working to bring solutions to the table, we should not forget the “old school” ways of getting information and resources into residents' hands. Having boots on the ground—going door to door—and meeting people where they are helps ensure a more equitable recovery.

Following the tragic deaths of nursing home residents during Hurricane Ida, AARP Louisiana not only called on federal and state authorities to conduct a thorough and transparent investigation into what transpired, but also worked with the Louisiana Department of Health and other stakeholders to strengthen emergency planning for all nursing homes in the state—not just for those on the coast. Legislation passed just a few months ago requires all nursing homes in Louisiana to have back-up power and it calls for greater collaboration with emergency preparedness authorities. It also gives the Department of Health increased responsibility to not just to review the plans, but to approve them.

Greater collaboration and establishing clear lines of communication in advance of a disaster is key to protecting the health and safety of vulnerable populations. Hurricane Ida's wind and water weren't the greatest threat to older adults. It was the heat. After four days of sweltering in extreme heat and humidity, and with several deaths, eight senior housing complexes were evacuated. Residents reported that they were trapped in an oven -- several stories up with no way out due to physical limitations. Residents had been abandoned. The City of New Orleans responded swiftly and worked with multiple organizations, including AARP, to pass an ordinance that requires a license to operate a housing facility, and requires building managers to both maintain a resident census that details health needs and provide on-site personnel during states of emergency. The ordinance went an extra step and now requires senior housing complexes to coordinate emergency and evacuation planning with the city.

Lessons Learned from Collaboration with FEMA

For the above reasons and more, it became clear that part of the solution lies in crafting stronger relationships with those who respond to disasters and those who care for older adults. To that end, AARP and FEMA have established a long-term, strategic partnership to advance accessible, safe, and livable communities for people of all ages, most recently materializing in the collaboration to produce two

complementary and co-branded documents focused on disaster planning, mitigation, and risk reduction. [FEMA's Guide to Expanding Mitigation: Making the Connection to Older Adults](#) discusses how natural hazards affect older adults and provides tips to reduce that risk. The guide is intended for emergency managers as well as state, local, tribal and territorial officials, planners, and other community stakeholders that serve or advocate for older adults. In addition, AARP's Disaster Resilience Tool Kit helps local community leaders develop strategies to reduce risk and the impacts of disasters on older adults.

While we expect the resources to be of great value in helping emergency managers, disaster recovery experts, older adult advocates and caregivers, and local and state leaders to establish better protocols to reduce risk for older adults, we also have already gained important lessons from the collaboration that are worth sharing with this committee.

We have learned that it is essential to make the right connections and build relationships across the fields of emergency managers and advocates for older adults – particularly given that they tend to operate with a distinct set of terminology and language that can impede mutual understanding. This committee knows the adage that the worst time to exchange business cards is at the site of a disaster – relationships between those responsible for disaster preparedness and recovery and those who advocate for older adults are essential to have in place well before disaster strikes.

We have learned that it is critical to identify where older adults are and how to reach them. Too often, people assume that if you have a plan for evacuating nursing homes, you have checked the box for older people. That's a deadly assumption. Most older adults live in their own homes and apartments, sometimes alone, and too often isolated. Special needs registries, that are voluntary and have privacy protections for information provided, can help provide better support for people who need it, and more precise information for first responders. In the wake of past disasters, states from Florida to Oregon have developed special needs registries to ensure better support for people who need it, and more precise information for first responders. More states should develop these kinds of tools to help localities get assistance to people with special needs. It is also critical that localities know which communications means are most effective, including low-tech options, to ensure that people get timely updates and news.

We have learned that it is essential to seek and include diverse perspectives in the process of planning for long-term development as much as it is for disaster response and recovery. Only by hearing directly from those who come from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and religious traditions, and who represent different education and income levels, can a community truly plan for a resilient future.

In addition, we have learned that communities must be mindful of response and relocation risks. Not only can relocation be infeasible for some due to the inability to drive, secure temporary housing, or the unwillingness to leave pets, but relocation is inherently tied to the need to remain connected to essential in-home medical equipment, or nearby caregivers. Many older adults can meet their medical needs in non-institutional settings with equipment such as ventilators, oxygen concentrators, and insulin pumps. Travelling with this equipment may be challenging both from a logistical standpoint and for the persons using the equipment. And for some who do relocate, the disruption associated with displacement – whether short- or long-term – can accelerate cognitive decline and compromise their physical health when medical care is interrupted.

Finally, we have learned that in order to better reduce the risk exposure for older adults, we must employ community-wide infrastructure strategies, including those that expand broadband access and education to all households, strengthen the range of transportation choices available to residents, and better protect the areas at greatest risk from future disasters, including those subject to repeated flooding, wildfires, or persistent drought conditions.

Recommendations

The challenges to preserving the safety and well-being of older adults when disasters occur are great. The solutions must be multi-pronged. AARP urges the following specific actions:

- The federal government should take a leadership role with states and localities in planning for and mitigating potential natural hazards with comprehensive disaster plans. This planning should specifically address the needs of older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers, in different settings. It should also involve these individuals in the development of the plans. Efforts should include disaster-resistant building codes, design regulations, and infrastructure plans and preventing development in high-risk zones.
- The federal government should also take a leadership role in working with states and localities to regularly plan, execute, and evaluate outreach and education activities to equip all residents to shelter in place or evacuate safely. This includes older adults, people with disabilities, people of color, people who do not speak English, low-income persons, and other difficult-to-reach populations.
- FEMA should have specific and detailed protocols that address the needs of older adults and vulnerable populations in disasters. FEMA should study the breakdowns in assistance that occurred in previous disasters and use these lessons to guide the development of new emergency response protocols.
- The federal government should engage in post-disaster recovery efforts that reach all populations, including older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. This includes providing technology infrastructure that enables rapid communications and easy, transparent access to necessary information. Disaster relief assistance and funding should be distributed equitably, fairly, and expeditiously.
- Evacuation orders should specifically address the needs of older adults, people with disabilities, and their caregivers, as well as others who may need to remain in the community due to special medical needs or other reasons. These orders should be backed by pragmatic evacuation plans that provide sufficient shelter space, including special needs shelters.
- Rebuilding and recovery efforts should promote livability and resilience by encouraging:
 - a diverse housing supply;
 - a wide range of mobility options;
 - access to safe, accessible, and sustainable public spaces; and
 - proximity to necessary services.
- Federal and state licensing standards should require that nursing facilities and assisted living/residential care facilities have well-developed, feasible, and practiced emergency plans for residents, as well as adequate numbers of well-trained staff to carry out such plans.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this vital issue. Older adults endure the brunt of damage from disaster events and their unique needs must be addressed in national emergency preparedness, response and recovery policies, plans, and programs. We look forward to working with you on this critical matter.