

Thank you, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, and Members of the Special Committee on Aging, for inviting me to speak before you today.

My name is Chris Nocco and I have the distinct honor of serving as the Sheriff of Pasco County, Florida, a county just north of Tampa Bay on Florida's gulf with a population of approximately 750,000, with 22% of that population being 65 years of age or older.

I would be remiss if I did not note today that I was first appointed Sheriff in 2011 by your fantastic Chairman and Florida's Senior Senator, Senator Rick Scott. Senator Scott, when he was our Governor in Florida, guided our state through unprecedented storms and hurricane seasons and the impact he left on preparedness, execution, public private partnerships, and emergency response is still saving lives and property in Florida today.

I would also be remiss to not note the outstanding partnership that we had when another one of your committee members, Senator Ashley Moody, was Florida's Attorney General. Senator Moody was a leader in scam prevention, price gouging, unlicensed contracting and other issues that impact all of our citizens, but especially our senior population, as they both prepare and recover from hurricanes.

With that, over the last year, our Pasco County community faced, in short succession, the threat of Hurricanes Debby, Helene and Milton. With more than 24 miles of coastline, Pasco County has unique challenges from these storms, even though none of them made direct landfall in Pasco County.

As Debby and Helene moved north through the Gulf of America, within 100 miles of Pasco County's coast, storm surge was pushed ashore, greatly impacting the more than 50,000 residents of Pasco County who live west of US19. This area of our county is home to many seniors and has a direct impact on them.

In the overnight hours of September 25 and September 26, as Hurricane Helene moved north just off of our coastline, I joined members of the Pasco Sheriff's Office and Pasco County Fire Rescue as we conducted active water rescues. We were also joined by the Florida National Guard and Florida State Guard, whose assistance was invaluable.

In those overnight hours, we were able to rescue more than 100 people from rapidly rising storm surge which ultimately crested at near record levels. Anecdotally, we were told by the National Guard that they had a vehicle rated for 18-feet of water that was unable to pass any further after encountering water in one of our neighborhoods.

I myself witnessed individuals who had climbed on roofs to avoid the rapidly rising storm surge. In one instance, a female, her small child and elderly relatives, had climbed to the roof of their three-story multifamily housing unit and were awaiting rescue.

This speaks directly to the need to follow local emergency management officials and orders, such as evacuation, especially for the most vulnerable amongst our community.

That is furthered by another example of a water rescue call for service we received from a hurricane in 2023 and, when we responded to the elderly couple with a boat to rescue them from their rapidly flooding house, they were not prepared and still needed to gather various medications and family pets.

We encourage everyone, if you do not heed local evacuation orders, to be prepared to go when you do make that decision, or you risk your life as well as the lives of first responders. Waiting for preparation to occur with rapidly rising floodwaters is not feasible for any party involved.

In these instances, our first priority is life safety and rescue, as you can imagine, all resources we have become involved in these rescue operations. Even with that, without the support of the National Guard, Coast Guard, Florida State Guard and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, we would not have been able to be as successful as we were with everyone rescued and no lives lost.

The resources that the state and our partner federal agencies, such as the National Guard and Coast Guard, can bring with them to these disaster response situations is invaluable for local governments, many of which, Pasco County included, do not have the funding available to purchase these response capabilities ourselves.

Hurricane Milton, which impacted our community in October of last year, presented a different challenge. As Milton made landfall south of Tampa Bay, we did not immediately see large impacts. However, as Milton moved through the center of our state in a northern direction, dropping rain on already saturated rivers and other bodies of water, riverine flooding became a significant issue.

Several days after Milton made landfall, and facing record levels of flooding on several rivers in Pasco County, we were again called in for water rescues as rivers began pouring out of their banks into communities, especially in the Enclave neighborhood in Wesley Chapel, in eastern Pasco County.

Again, without the assistance of our state and federal partners, this rescue operation would not have been as successful as it was.

Through the duration of all three of these storms, we, along with state and federal partners, were able to respond to more than 300 flooding related calls for service and rescue more than 500 people from rising flood waters and storm surge.

However, it is my opinion that law enforcement and emergency response must continue to advance and embrace rapidly evolving technologies. Items such as drones provide invaluable benefits to disaster preparedness, response and recovery while also providing local governments with efficiencies.

For example, the Pasco Sheriff's Office is proud of the partnerships we have established with both Axon and Skydio, two companies leading the way in emerging technology for drones and law enforcement. With drones, pre-storm and post-storm mapping can be done in a matter of hours in a much more cost-efficient manner than the old method of flying a helicopter.



In addition, with numerous drones, we can evaluate multiple situations at the same time which allows us to make faster and more accurate decisions to save lives.

Helicopters, by the sheer nature of their fuel consumption and maintenance costs, are significantly more expensive to operate than drones. As local governments are faced with tough financial decisions, drones can be more beneficial and cost effective when used for emergency preparedness and response, especially when it comes to pre- and post-storm mapping and the monitoring of flood waters.

A prime example of this occurred during the riverine flooding caused by Hurricane Milton that I discussed just a bit ago. Through drones, we were able to actively monitor river gauges and levels upstream, which allowed us to relay this information to communities downstream and warn them of what was coming.

This information provided by drones allowed us to prepare our community and, I believe, again, saved lives.

There will always be a need for helicopters for rescuing individuals but the combination of our use of drones with our aviation unit has proven invaluable.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the outstanding men and women of the Pasco Sheriff's Office, the first responders and medical personnel in Tampa Bay and the state of Florida, along with the other agencies from across the country that came in to assist. Make no mistake, when things are at their worst, public safety in Florida is at its best.

With little sleep and in miserable conditions, they persevere through numerous storms to ensure the safety of our citizens.

To our citizens, their support and cooperation with public safety is an understatement. We know that their safety is paramount, along with providing them a sense of relief that there are brave women and men prepared to protect them and their families when times are catastrophic.

I also want to thank our own Pasco Sheriff's Office volunteer units for their assistance and look forward to the future as we continue to build out these units with more prior military, law enforcement, fire rescue and other citizens who have unique skill sets that will provide us with greater capabilities to address emergency situations.

For the power company employees in the great state of Florida and those that travel in, along with those in the gasoline and diesel supply chain, thank you. They are unsung heroes, but without them we cannot get back to the quality of life that makes public safety's job that much easier.

And last, but most importantly, is our thanks to our heavenly Lord, Jesus Christ. Through Him all things are possible, and we pray and ask for His protection in this upcoming hurricane season.

With that, I thank you for allowing me to present here today and I look forward to your questions.