

Statement of L. Vance Taylor

Preparing for Disasters – Unique Challenges Facing Older Americans

**United States Senate
Special Committee on Aging
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Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, Members of the Committee, my name is L. Vance Taylor.

It is an honor to testify today. I do so, not on behalf of any government agency, but as a subject matter expert in the field of emergency management who lives with a disability and uses a power wheelchair.

We're in an era of increasingly frequent and severe disasters. As the scope and devastation of these events grow, it's critical to recognize that—while wildfires, earthquakes, tornadoes, and hurricanes strike without regard for geography or politics—they consistently and disproportionately impact older adults and people with disabilities.

One reason why is because, well-intentioned emergency managers who can walk, see, and hear have developed plans in isolation, without input from the full spectrum of the communities they serve.

In my current role, I activate in response to major disasters throughout the state.

While responding to one wildfire, I visited an emergency shelter. There, I saw survivors on the worst day of their lives. It was hot and muggy, and ash from the air clung to their sweat, forming a thick grime on their skin.

Because the jurisdiction hadn't integrated the provision of portable accessible showers, when older adults and people with disabilities arrived, they couldn't bathe. I'll never forget the look on their faces when I had to tell them that they had no choice but sit in their own filth until we could bring in the appropriate resources for them.

Experiences like this should serve as a call to action to embrace inclusive planning.

As a best practice, forward-leaning emergency management agencies are committing to end the practice of planning *for* the community. Instead, they are choosing to plan *with* the community.

A vital step is establishing state and local Access and Functional Needs (AFN) Advisory Committees to ensure better outcomes for the whole community.

Inclusive planning leads to press conferences that include American Sign Language interpreters, the posting of critical updates in accessible formats, the provision of accessible evacuation resources, and shelters that are both physically and programmatically accessible.

When the whole community is involved in planning, the result is a system that sees, hears, and serves everyone. It is also a system that literally saves lives.

California leads the nation in inclusive planning.

And yet, I'll be the first to say: the work is far from done.

We have the resources to develop innovative best practices, guidance documents, and training curricula—and we share them freely with states across the country.

But as valuable as those tools are, when disaster strikes, what communities truly need is sustained support from federal partners like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Administration for Community Living (ACL), and the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR).

They need funding for the full range of federal resources required to respond to and recover from large-scale events that overwhelm local capacity.

Cutting or eliminating these agencies would have devastating consequences—especially for older adults and people with disabilities whose safety, independence, and survival often hang in the balance.

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Gillibrand, Members of the Committee—you have an opportunity to affirm that the mission of inclusive emergency management is one of the most human responsibilities we share.

To show that Washington can be counted on to empower emergency managers and the whole community to lift the hands that hang down. To show up for one another. To reduce human suffering and prevent needless loss of life among older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Doing so is a reflection of who we are—not as Republicans or Democrats, but as Americans.

And yes, it's a lift.

But you don't have to lift alone.

Federal agencies will lift with you. States across the country will lift with you. I will lift with you.

And as we lift together, the communities we serve will ascend.

Thank you.