

DEPARTMENT OF ELDER AFFAIRS

STATE OF FLORIDA

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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SECRETARY

ON THE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, AGING, AND SPECIAL NEEDS

BEFORE THE

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

U.S. SENATE

June 24, 2009

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Martinez, and distinguished Members of the Senate Special Committee on Aging. I am Douglas Beach, Secretary of the Florida Department of Elder Affairs. I want to thank the Committee for inviting me here today to share our experiences and best practices in the State of Florida, and to discuss ways we can best serve older Americans in advance of, during and after a disaster or emergency.

Earlier this decade, Florida faced an unprecedented onslaught from nature, as we were forced to contend with eight hurricanes and several additional tropical storms in a 14-month period. Even as we worked to recover from the 2004 and 2005 storm seasons, 2006 brought Florida two more named storms that would test our state's capabilities to prepare, respond and recover. After something of a reprieve in 2007, last year brought a stern reminder that there is no such thing as a "minor" tropical event, as relatively mild Tropical Storm Fay brought significant flooding and destruction to our state. Then just last month we saw a clear example that it doesn't even take a named storm to disrupt lives, when several days of drenching rain caused major flooding and resulted in the displacement of more than 630 residents near Daytona Beach in Volusia County.

For me, these events are more than just a subject for theoretical discussion. Before I became Elder Affairs Secretary, I served as Chief Executive Officer of the Senior Resource Alliance, which is the Area Agency on Aging for a four-county area that stretches from Orlando to Cape Canaveral. I spent several weeks after both Charley and Frances helping to secure blue tarps on homes to replace roofs that had disappeared. Communication with our teams in the field became a real challenge when telephone and cell phone service was cut off, and we scrambled to address the special needs of elders among the millions of residents who had been impacted by the storms. I personally felt the anxiety as the eye of Hurricane Charley passed within 15 miles of my home and my family.

Working with Governor Charlie Crist for the past two-and-a-half years as Elder Affairs Secretary, our approach has been that no emergency is too small, no threat too remote to dismiss it without doing some planning and preparation for potential impacts on older residents. The recent outbreak of the H1N1 swine flu virus has shown us that we need to be ready for anything, in case vital programs and services for the elderly are disrupted.

Planning and training are important and can prepare us for an emergency, but in the end our success in response and recovery will be determined by our ability to creatively utilize available resources to meet the needs of the citizens who are affected. I am proud of the fact that in Florida, even though we have an extremely experienced and seasoned state emergency response team, we are constantly striving to further improve our plans. Governor Crist has charged us with continuously looking to develop innovative solutions that will enhance our effectiveness, better utilize our limited resources and eliminate any duplication of effort. Many of the lessons we learned and procedures we developed have become best practices.

Florida greatly benefited from the experience and leadership of Craig Fugate, who oversaw 23 declared state emergencies during his eight years as our state's emergency management director. Unfortunately for us, Craig's visionary leadership placed him in the national spotlight, and President Obama wisely asked him to serve as Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Craig was instrumental in establishing a permanent seat for the Florida Department of Elder Affairs at the state's Emergency Operations Center, and we look forward to his continued efforts to ensure that the needs of elders remain a priority in all phases of disaster preparedness and emergency management.

As we head toward the end of the first month of the 2009 hurricane season, I am pleased to have this opportunity to outline for you the ways in which the State of Florida prepares its elder population for emergencies, responds to elders during emergencies, and provides assistance to them through post-disaster recovery efforts.

PREPAREDNESS

In Florida, as in other communities across the nation that have been impacted by natural or man-made emergencies, we recognize that older adults have distinct needs that must be addressed at all stages: planning, preparedness, response and recovery. Many elders are slower to react to calls to prepare, they are more limited in their physical ability to respond, they have special medical needs, their transportation options may be constrained, and they may resist suggestions to evacuate because they don't wish to "abandon" their homes or pets, or they are unsure where to go.

In Florida, we have distinct areas of operations that focus on two separate segments of the elder population: those who reside in long-term care facilities and those who are able to age in place in Florida's communities.

Plans and procedures designed to support emergency operations for the general population may in some instances be inappropriate for seniors. For elders residing in long-term care facilities (such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities and adult family care homes), it is necessary to ensure that each facility has its own viable evacuation plan and that the facility's plan for sheltering residents in place ensures their safety and security while protecting their rights and dignity.

In advance of the 2009 hurricane season, the Department of Elder Affairs published this year's edition of its *Disaster Preparedness Guide for Elders*, a comprehensive guide filled with tips, procedures and contact numbers designed to foster a culture of preparedness in our state. I brought copies of this publication with me today to share with each member of the committee. More than a quarter-million copies of this guide are distributed in both English and Spanish, and it is also available online at <http://elderaffairs.state.fl.us/english/disasterguide/2009.pdf>. The guide is meant to be used by the elders we serve and their caregivers so they can create an all-hazard plan for

emergencies and disasters. The 2009 guide features information on potential disasters including hurricanes, wildfires, floods, tornadoes, severe weather, hazardous material incidents, pandemic flu and even heat stroke. The publication includes a Disaster Supplies Kit checklist, disaster safety tips, emergency contact information, tips on caring for a pet during a disaster, and safety tips for traveling during an emergency.

State researchers have determined that Florida is home to 4.4 million residents age 60 and older, and has the largest percentage of seniors of any state in the nation. Fewer than 5 percent of these elders live in nursing homes or similar care facilities, meaning more than nine out of ten elders live independently in single-family homes, condominiums and everything in between. It is important to understand that these resilient and independent citizens, like all Floridians, must take actions to prepare and plan before an event occurs. Being ready for a disaster is a key part of maintaining independence, and if elders and vulnerable populations are prepared ahead of time, they will be better able to cope and recover more quickly.

We in Florida have also found that the better we are able to educate the public about the level of services they can realistically expect to receive during and after an emergency, the better the response will be from the entire community. It is vitally important for people to understand that they must be prepared to survive on their own for the first 72 hours of the emergency, because supplies and services may not be available until first responders complete their search and rescue missions and the community begins restoring critical services such as police, fire, electricity, water, sewer, hospitals and telecommunications.

As I travel around our state to meet with elders, service providers and members of the network of aging service providers, I stress the importance of taking personal responsibility to have an emergency plan ready in advance. These emergency plans must support the particular needs of elders, including providing for:

- emergency supplies
- evacuation and sheltering plans
- funds to cover unplanned expenses
- transportation
- food, water and ice
- medications
- generators and fuel
- emergency contact information and a plan for communicating with family and friends
- plans for pets
- important documents, including prescriptions and living wills

In February 2008, Florida updated its Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan to encourage the integration of a coordinated federal, state, and local emergency response plan for elders in the event of public health emergencies, catastrophic events or disasters. The Department of Elder Affairs revised its support agency responsibilities under Appendix VI of the state's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan to reflect its

role in coordinating with federal, state and local agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, to address the needs of both elders residing in assisted living and long-term care facilities and those aging in place in residential communities. The Department also clarified its role as the primary liaison with the Area Agencies on Aging, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, Comprehensive Assessment and Review for Long-Term Care Services (CARES) state and regional offices, state and district Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program offices, the SHINE (Serving the Health Insurance Needs of Elders) program, and agency program offices to make certain that elders who currently receive services are contacted before and after an event to ensure minimal disruption to service delivery and a continuity of care.

RESPONSE

In dealing with Florida's elders, our response period begins as long as possible before emergency conditions actually exist. Not all emergencies and disasters can be foreseen, but the various components of Florida's aging network mobilize as soon as it becomes clear that a potential threat exists.

At the first opportunity, my Department's emergency operations office establishes contact with the eleven Area Agencies on Aging that cover the 800 miles from Pensacola to Key West. When the impending threat takes time to arrive, such as a tropical storm or hurricane, we establish daily conference calls with all the Area Agencies; when the threat is more immediate, such as a drastic freeze or flooding rains, we hold the conference calls with as much lead time as possible. The main function of these calls is to ensure that the areas most likely to be impacted have the supplies and resources they will need, to redeploy resources from one area to another, and to ensure that lines of communication are working properly. At the local level, the Area Agencies work with their lead agencies and service providers to fine-tune call-down lists and, where appropriate, contact elder clients individually to make sure they are aware of the impending threat and have taken the necessary steps to prepare.

One crucial aspect of emergency preparedness and response for an elder constituency is food and nutrition. Most seniors have substantially different dietary needs than younger persons. In some cases the difference is simply one of personal preference, reflecting physical and preference changes that have occurred over the years. In other cases, the difference is crucial and is directly related to the nutritional needs of the individual senior. With this in mind, before the disaster occurs local providers deliver a three-day supply of shelf-stable packaged meals to Meals on Wheels clients. And because of the physiological needs of elders, these cannot be just any meals – military-style MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat, contain far too much sodium to be considered safe for elders, so senior clients are provided with meals specifically designed for their nutritional needs.

Evacuations are difficult for anyone, but they pose special problems for elders. As I noted earlier, many elders have special medical needs that must be accommodated, many need special transportation assistance, and many simply resist leaving the homes that hold a

lifetime of accumulated possessions, mementos and memories. To many elders, pets are considered a member of the family, no less cherished than long-grown children, and these beloved animals must be accommodated. Additionally, many elders are convinced that their homes are safe, simply because they survived whatever nature threw their way in the past. This false sense of security, combined with uncertainty about shelters or other arrangements, can lead to a decision not to evacuate, putting lives needlessly in jeopardy.

Our Department works continually with the aging network and local and state emergency management officials to increase awareness of these issues and ensure that plans and operations take these concerns into account. This preparation ensures that when a disaster occurs, Florida's elder citizens are well prepared.

Even though elders with special medical needs are particularly vulnerable to unfavorable health outcomes during disasters, they often have limited information on where to go and who to turn to for assistance. Although special needs shelters are available in each Florida county to accommodate those with special medical needs, elders may be reluctant to use this option because they wish to remain independent or simply don't know about the facilities. Individuals whose well-being is dependent on an uninterrupted supply of electrical power are particularly at risk when power outages and fuel shortages occur during an emergency.

It is incumbent upon city and county governments and the aging network to educate the elder population about the availability of special needs shelters, to ensure that those requiring special medical assistance are identified by and registered with emergency managers, to provide transportation to the shelters as needed, and to have appropriate services, nutrition and medical assistance available at the shelters. Reverse 911 emergency calls have proven quite effective in reaching vulnerable populations and providing updated information. Public health departments can and should be equal partners with public safety and other critical agencies in local emergency management systems, as they are responsible and accountable for the health and well-being of all citizens – particularly those with special needs.

Local health agencies are responsible for identifying and triaging those with special needs; ensuring that they are transported to appropriate shelters; meeting their medical, mental health and social-service needs while they are in shelter; conducting post-event planning; and ensuring that they are safely returned home or to other appropriate locations.

Catastrophic events, public health emergencies and long-term power outages create problems not only for frail elders but also for those elders who under normal circumstances are aging in place and leading healthy and independent lives. These self-sufficient elders may require assistance during an emergency if they find themselves stranded in their homes, separated from family and friends and without regular services that support their independent lives. In Florida, many older residents of high-rise condominiums find that even if their building remains livable, the elevators are not functioning and they cannot access medical care, appropriate nutrition and medicine.

To address this and other concerns, the Florida Legislature enacted comprehensive emergency management legislation in 2006, following the state's experiences of 2004 and 2005. Among other provisions, this legislation (Chapter 2006-71, Laws of Florida) established a requirement that emergency generators be available to operate public elevators in new and existing residential multi-family dwellings, including condominiums, that are at least 75 feet tall. The emergency power generated must be sufficient to operate at least one public elevator for at least five days after the regular power supply is cut off. The emergency power must also operate any connected fire alarm system that also controls elevator operation, as well as emergency lighting in certain indoor public areas. If the owners of the building do not want to purchase a suitable generator, they can instead pre-wire the elevator and other required systems to accept a generator and contract for an outside vendor to supply a generator and fuel source.

To ensure the well-being of Florida seniors before, during and after an emergency, the Department of Elder Affairs maintains very important relationships with a wide variety of outside organizations. We work with the American Red Cross to spread the word about their *Safe and Well* website, a secure internet site that lets residents of affected areas reassure loved ones and friends that they are safe. The Department works with the Red Cross to address other needs, and also works with the Salvation Army, Volunteer Florida and faith-based organizations. These volunteer-driven partners provide invaluable assistance in making contact with elders and helping them with meals, debris removal, transportation and, later in the process, home repairs.

RECOVERY

Once the immediate emergency has subsided and Florida has entered the recovery phase, certain questions must be addressed regarding seniors. An elder's home may be habitable, but will he be able to get to the one grocery store in town that has re-opened? She may have electricity, but what if the facility that supplies her oxygen canisters has been destroyed? He may have a two-week supply of his diabetes medicine remaining, but what if his doctor evacuated to another state and doesn't plan to return home for another month?

Before elders who are in special needs shelters are discharged to return home or go elsewhere in the community, these and other questions need to be considered. The Department of Elder Affairs has developed a *Rapid Needs Assessment and Discharge Planning Form* to help discharge planners determine whether a special needs client has a viable discharge plan to transition successfully back to his or her pre-event residence, or whether that client needs help developing an alternate relocation plan. This form may be used at special needs shelters and Disaster Recovery Centers, or in conjunction with community outreach efforts. The goal is to determine the status of elderly and vulnerable populations impacted by the emergency and to assist them in obtaining services and resources so they can successfully transition back into the community. The Department

of Elder Affairs has been actively involved with the Special Needs Shelters Interagency Committee in our state, working closely with the leadership of the Florida Department of Health's Office of Public Health Nursing. The form has been used by federal, state and county officials in Florida, as well as by authorities in several other states including California, Texas, Mississippi and Iowa. In an effort to make these materials more accessible, we have posted them on our website at <http://elderaffairs.state.fl.us/english/pubs/EU/EUdisaster/RapidNeedsAssessmentPlanningForm.pdf>.

Sometimes, circumstances call for a level of response that goes beyond the routine process envisioned with this form. As noted previously, the Florida Legislature adopted comprehensive emergency management legislation in 2006. One of the legislation's provisions authorizes the Secretary of the Department of Elder Affairs to convene Multiagency Special Needs Shelter Discharge Planning Response Teams at any time he or she deems it appropriate and necessary, or as requested by the State Emergency Operations Center. The goal of the response team is to assist local areas when they are severely impacted by a natural or manmade disaster that requires the use of special needs shelters. These teams can be activated to provide resource and logistical support to help local jurisdictions transition clients from special needs shelters back into their communities, making sure appropriate services and resources are in place. The following State of Florida agencies have designated employees in local communities and regions to serve on Discharge Planning Response Teams:

- Department of Elder Affairs
- Department of Health
- Department of Children and Families
- Department of Veterans' Affairs
- Department of Community Affairs
- Agency for Health Care Administration
- Agency for Persons with Disabilities

After a devastating emergency, one of the greatest needs for all residents is housing. This problem can be especially acute for seniors, whose concerns can range from affordability to interior mobility to safety accommodations. In 2004, Hurricane Ivan alone damaged or destroyed more than 40 percent of the housing stock in Escambia County – more than 50,000 housing units in Pensacola and the surrounding area. With the onset of multiple hurricanes and storms, many elders throughout Florida have found themselves displaced, living in temporary and/or substandard housing, and using significantly more of their income and savings for housing-related expenses. Soaring insurance premiums and risk-based pricing associated with these disasters have become serious concerns in our state.

Florida's recent experience with multiple storms taught the clear lesson that there is a significant need for residents and communities to be better prepared to meet post-disaster housing relief and recovery needs in the future. Florida emergency management officials are currently studying whether distressed and foreclosed properties may offer temporary solutions to affordable housing shortages after an emergency. However, even if it is

determined that this is an option, inspections would be needed to determine whether the homes are safe and suitable for occupancy or whether they have fallen into disrepair.

Because many elders live on fixed incomes, they are often adversely affected by financial issues following a disaster, including the cost of rebuilding a home and difficulty in obtaining adequate insurance coverage with affordable premiums. The Department's Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Operations Office has become a strategic partner with our Communities for a Lifetime Bureau, which helps communities implement elder-friendly enhancements that actually benefit people of all ages. Participating communities engage in a self-assessment and planning process, addressing a variety of areas including universal design for housing, accessibility, health care, transportation and efficient use of natural resources. The initiative focuses on enhancing opportunities for people of all ages to continue living in their own communities for a lifetime. These initiatives help communities in their efforts to ensure the safety of elders and vulnerable citizens in the event of an emergency.

A final consideration regarding elders in the post-disaster phase is the unpleasant reality that some see opportunity in others' misfortune. Natural disasters often attract scam artists, and their favorite target is seniors. Many elders grew up in a more trusting time, and this makes them potentially vulnerable to price gouging or outright theft, especially for home repair or debris cleanup activities. The Florida Attorney General's Office and the state's Division of Consumer Services (part of the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services) both activate price-gouging hotlines in the wake of emergencies.

A variety of other legal service programs in Florida can assist seniors at such a time, including services funded by Title IIIB of the Older Americans Act, the statewide Senior Legal Helpline, local legal aid and legal service programs and local pro bono programs. However, it is unfortunate that many legal needs of elders in Florida go unmet following a disaster; we will continue to develop resources to ease this concern.

CONCLUSION

Florida demographers recently projected that among Florida's 4.4 million residents age 60 and older, some 1.3 million have at least one disability. Many of those without such a disability are nonetheless afflicted with the routine infirmities of age. Vulnerable populations are particularly at risk during and after a disaster. In order to give seniors the greatest chance to come through a disaster in the best possible physical and emotional condition, planners must consider their distinctive vulnerabilities beforehand.

The Department of Elder Affairs continues to ensure that the interests of the elder population are represented in local emergency response agencies and at each county's Emergency Operations Center. In this way, federal, state and local agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, can do their best to plan for and meet the needs of elders during public health emergencies, catastrophic events or disasters.

The Department also seeks the support and assistance of Florida's eleven Area Agencies on Aging and the entire aging network. Working in partnership, these entities strive to identify and share available resources in order to locate and contact elders who may require assistance during an emergency.

One of the most important roles of local government is to protect citizens from harm, including disasters and emergencies. Most public health and county emergency preparedness activities address the needs of the general population well, but research has shown that agencies are not as well equipped to anticipate and respond to the needs of those populations most at risk for adverse health outcomes. Much work remains to be done at the local, state and federal levels in our response to the special needs population.

The problem can be addressed by coordinating the efforts of state and local emergency response planners with agencies, health care providers and advocacy groups that provide services to elders and vulnerable populations in each community on a daily basis. Collaborative planning ahead of time results in an improved emergency plan, a better determination of resource needs, and more informed actions and decisions.

Our goal is to ensure that every elder in Florida has and understands the information he or she needs to adequately prepare for, cope with and recover from any emergencies that may occur. Local agencies and advocacy groups can help achieve this goal by better defining the vulnerable populations in their communities and coordinating efforts to ensure that resources are available to help elder residents before, during and after emergencies. Our Department and all of Florida state government stands ready to assist emergency officials in each community as we constantly strive to improve Florida's disaster and emergency management plan for elders.

As Governor Charlie Crist and I travel our great state, we often meet with officials at local emergency operations centers to offer our support, ask how we can help, and thank them for their efforts. We are constantly reminded of how fortunate we are to have so many committed men and women who dedicate their lives every day to serving the citizens of our communities. There can be no higher calling.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this information today on behalf of Florida's elders, and am available to answer any questions you may have.