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National Association of Area Agencies on Aging

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, Suite 1200 / Washington, DC 20036 / Tel: 202-872-0888 / Fax: 202-872-0057 / www.n4a.org

TESTIMONY OF

Sandy Markwood

**Chief Executive Officer
National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)**

BEFORE THE

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging

**“Emergency Preparedness, Protecting Aging & Special Needs
Populations”**

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Good morning, Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Martinez and other distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Sandy Markwood. I am the Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a).

n4a represents our nation's 629 Area Agencies on Aging, or AAAs as they are known, and 244 Title VI Native American aging programs that serve older adults and caregivers around the country. As the local component of the Aging Services Network, AAAs and Title VI aging programs have successfully delivered aging services in every community across the country for more than 35 years, and provide assistance to over 8 million older Americans annually.

I want to thank the Committee for inviting n4a to testify on the issue of emergency preparedness, and the ongoing efforts of AAAs and the Aging Services Network to meet the special needs of older Americans in advance of, during and after a disaster or emergency.

Due to the demographic shift over the next 15 to 20 years and a corresponding increase in the percentage of older adults aging in place in their homes and communities, the challenge of addressing the special needs of older adults in disaster planning, response and recovery efforts will continue to grow in importance.

As we all know, the events surrounding Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005 served as a "focusing event" to draw attention to the disproportionate burdens that elders face during disasters and the need to better plan to address their special needs during response and recovery efforts.

Depending on a number of factors such as aging demographics and the prevalence of natural disasters, states have been successful to varying degrees in integrating the needs of the older adult population into their emergency preparedness plans. But one thing is clear: the most successful states and localities have ongoing, collaborative efforts between their emergency management and health and social services agencies and have involved the Aging Services Network.

The Special Needs of Older Adults in Disasters

There are a number of unique circumstances that must be taken into account when addressing the needs of older adults in times of emergencies or disasters. Drawing on her experience from the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, in October 2005 testimony before this Committee, Leigh Wade-Schild, Director of the Area Agency on Aging of Southwest Florida, explained some of the challenges:

“The challenges [are] transporting older adults; providing appropriate health services and nutrition; meeting the special needs of people with limiting conditions such as hearing loss and dementia; emotional issues, complicated by separation from loved ones and caregivers; and a particular vulnerability to those who prey on older adults.”

By definition, disasters and other emergencies reduce any agency’s capacity to conduct business as usual. In order to succeed as the first line of response for older adults, the Aging Services Network must have better access to decision-makers, be directly involved in long-range planning, be at the table in order to coordinate services, and have adequate resources and technology and communication tools to adequately respond to older adults’ needs.

It is critical that AAAs provide older adults in the community with the early warning they need to evacuate. AAAs are also best positioned to do the necessary follow-up make to ensure that older adults, particularly those who are homebound and dependent on support services, have the assistance they need to evacuate.

AAAs have found through their experiences in responding to disasters that older adults have distinct needs that present challenges to community-wide emergency planning and response. Each stage of an emergency—during evacuation, at emergency shelters or when returning to the community—needs to be handled differently when dealing with frail, older adults.

During a crisis, seniors may not receive the health supports and services they need to survive. Their needs are too complex, serious and individualized to be treated with the “one size fits all” approach that shelters and relief organizations are able to offer. Volunteers and workers unfamiliar with older adults’ needs may not recognize or know how to deal with important signals about the senior’s state of mind and body. Addressing the needs of those with chronic conditions and dementia become particularly difficult in a disaster situation.

Aging Services Network’s Role in Planning for and Responding to the Needs of Older Adults in a Disaster

As the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 and subsequent disasters have shown, the Aging Services Network plays a critical role in responding to the needs of older adults during emergencies. Advanced planning, prevention, communication, and state and local partnerships have proven to be critical in helping to ensure the safety and well-being of frail older adults, especially those who are particularly vulnerable in a disaster or emergency.

The U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) and the Aging Services Network actively work in partnership with other federal, state and local agencies, to help prepare for and respond to emergencies. AoA has worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to deploy personnel on human services mission assignments to ensure that seniors and individuals with special needs receive appropriate assistance. This leadership was evident during the response to the Iowa floods in 2008, when AoA called on experienced Aging Service Network staff from Florida to help provide the Iowa AAAs with valuable technical assistance during the disaster. To help reach affected older adults more quickly, AoA has gathered data and information to assess the status of special needs populations, in order to identify, track and prioritize assistance through the Aging Services Network.

In addition to its role in partnering with other federal agencies, AoA distributes disaster assistance funding to State Units on Aging (SUAs) and Tribal Organizations to help reimburse their additional service costs during federally declared disasters. This funding is available under Title III of the Older Americans Act on a set-aside basis. The total amount of funding available is specified under Section 310 of the Act as an amount from Title III equal to 2 percent of the appropriation for Title IV Program Innovations. In recent years, the amount of Title IV funding available has decreased dramatically, curtailing the amount disaster funds available in a given year.

In FY 2008, AoA drew upon this funding source to provide seven disaster assistance grants totaling nearly \$300,000 to six states including Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Ohio and Texas. In areas of Louisiana hardest hit by hurricanes Gustav and Ike in September 2008, it was estimated that approximately 600,000 older adults age 60 and older were directly affected. All of the state's 36 AAAs reported some impact from the storms, and an estimated

575,000 older adults needed to be evacuated during the height of the two hurricanes. In December, AoA released \$60,000 to the Louisiana SUA to assist in relief efforts.

Last June, during the most devastating floods in Iowa's history, nearly 65,000 Iowans age 60 and older requested assistance. In response, AoA distributed a total of \$50,000 to 11 of the 13 AAAs to help defray the cost of providing gap-filling services such as case management, meals, transportation, chore services, home repairs, and adult protective services. During the floods and in the long recovery period that followed, older adults needed a wide range of supports beyond what FEMA and other entities could offer. For example, an 88-year-old woman who lost everything would need help:

- Accessing appropriate transportation during evacuation so she can get to shelter safely;
- Securing replacement prescription medication and other medical devices she relies on to maintain her health;
- Navigating the disaster relief channels and paperwork, including handling personal financial affairs if a family member is not available;
- Managing her activities of daily living, particularly if her regular caregiver was also displaced by the flood;
- Identifying appropriate affordable short-term housing until she can return to her home and ensuring that the disaster does not force her into expensive institutional care in the long run; and
- Obtaining other special assistance she needs to stay healthy and independent after the emergency.

Disasters wreck havoc in everyone's lives, to be sure, but the needs of older adults further complicate assistance efforts. The professionals who assist such older adults must continue to be involved in their lives during times of crisis or other emergency.

New Survey Results Shed Light on AAA Emergency Preparedness Planning Efforts

Based on preliminary findings from a June 2009 survey conducted by n4a and Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University on emergency preparedness, 25 percent of the 59 percent of AAAs responding reported that they were located in a Planning and Service Area (PSA) that has been part of a federally declared disaster. Out of those responding, 94 percent rated their emergency preparedness plan effective or somewhat effective, and 97 percent of respondents said they review and revise their plans on an annual or more frequent basis. Sixty-five percent of AAAs reported that their emergency plan is part of a local, city, county or regional plan, while 44 percent reported their plan is part of a SUA plan or a statewide plan organized by the Governor. Twenty-six percent of respondents indicated that they were part of multiple emergency plans.

The survey also offers a sense of the types of information contained in AAA emergency preparedness and response plans. AAAs reported that their plans included the following items:

- Provisions for the elderly and disabled including those who may be homebound, live alone and have other special needs (77 percent);
- Processes for documenting essential information useful for emergency responders in prioritizing essential activities in a disaster event (69 percent);
- Guidelines for citizens to develop their own plan, disaster kits and emergency contact information (59 percent);
- Plans for obtaining back-up food, water and other essential supplies that would be readily available if needed (55 percent);

- Provisions for public education (49 percent);
- Enlistment of volunteers to help with planning, training, communications and general assistance in times of emergency (37 percent);
- Collaborative arrangements with nursing homes in the PSA (31 percent);
- Collaborative arrangements with other AAAs in neighboring areas (27 percent);
- Collaborative arrangements with assisted living facilities in the PSA (25 percent); and
- Arrangements for handling pets (20 percent).

Additionally, the survey indicates that AAAs include the following provisions in their plans to continue providing services during a disaster:

- Information about locations with large concentrations of elders (71 percent);
- Contact information for caregivers of frail elderly (69 percent);
- An emergency operations plan if the location of the AAA is directly affected by a disaster (64 percent);
- A contingency plan if the home-delivered meals program is unable to operate for several days (62 percent);
- A system for knowing the location of frail individuals who are relocated during a disaster (52 percent);
- A registry for clients who require ongoing assistance (40 percent);
- A transportation plan for frail individuals who need assistance relocating from their homes (40 percent);
- Geographically mapped information including locations that could serve as service delivery points during the recovery period (19 percent);
- Provisions for obtaining and dispensing prescription drugs (17 percent); and
- Geographically mapped locations of frail individuals or clients who require ongoing access to electronic equipment essential to their health (15 percent).

Importance of Long-Range Planning and Interagency Coordination Efforts

Recognizing the importance of coordinated planning efforts, in the 2006 Amendments to the Older Americans Act, Congress included new provisions that require state and area plans to “include information detailing how [SUA and AAAs] will coordinate activities, and develop long-range emergency plans, with local and state emergency response agencies, relief organizations, local and state governments, and any other institutions that have responsibility for disaster relief service delivery.”

In order to fulfill this mandated planning role, AAAs must be at the table when federal, state and local governments draft emergency plans. AAAs represent a vulnerable population whose special needs are not always appropriately supported in times of crisis. The Aging Services Network offers key essentials in emergency situations, including access to qualified staff, supplies and other resources, as well as direct ties to the community. Emergency and relief personnel should be prepared and directed to work in concert with AAA staff and volunteers so that older adults are provided appropriate, flexible and responsive assistance. This cannot happen unless AAAs are directly involved in the long-range disaster planning process.

Long-range planning must involve strategies for different types of disasters, e.g., natural disasters, acts of terrorism, transportation accidents, power shortages and others that may arise. In addition, the full range of AAA services—such as information and referral assistance, nutrition programs, in-home services, senior centers, transportation, and volunteers—need to be considered in the planning process and included in disaster response plans.

Second only to long-range planning is coordination. The Aging Services Network excels at coordinating care for older adults because it allows for effective coordination among federal, state and local aging entities. In times of crisis, AAAs need to be directly involved in the coordination of emergency response agencies, relief organizations, governments or any other entity tasked with disaster relief service delivery. Being involved in long-range planning will formalize our role in the disaster response, but coordination is critical once disaster strikes.

For example, the Heritage AAA in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which covers a rural seven-county area including Iowa City, staffed Disaster Recovery Centers following the floods last year. The AAA played a key “second responder” role working with clients by providing one-on-one assistance and case management services. The AAA also worked with clients at special needs shelters in their area. Each county has their own agreements for transportation services between Emergency Preparedness agencies and local providers.

In an effort to promote greater coordination, the Heritage AAA has created a disaster planning work group that includes local aging providers. They require all providers to have an emergency plan in place in order to receive funding from the AAA. The AAA has worked in Linn County, Iowa, to update the county emergency registry, which provided critical information during the floods last year. Additionally, the AAA recognizes one of its most important roles is conducting pre- and post-disaster awareness campaigns to educate residents about preparing for emergencies and the resources available to older adults and persons with disabilities with special needs.

During a tornado threat last year, the Weld County AAA in Colorado did door-to-door checks of vulnerable older adults and contacted providers to ensure continuation of operations, and

then focused on client assessment and assistance following the emergency. Unfortunately, the AAA reported that some emergency shelters were not adequate for older adults and there were no special needs shelters available. To improve this situation, the Weld County AAA is participating in a special needs work group, which is meeting regularly to look at ways to create a special needs registry similar to other counties, as well as developing plans for special needs shelters. Current challenges include developing connections with Emergency Preparedness agencies and understanding their institutional culture. The lack of coordination of transportation providers between agencies and the need for adequate resources to support coordination activities have also been identified as barriers.

In Florida, the Area Agency on Aging of Palm Beach and Treasure Coast has worked with its provider network and older volunteers to advance emergency readiness work following the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons. In partnership with the Board of County Commissioners of Palm Beach County and its Emergency Operating Center, the AAA has assigned two individuals to each of the County's six newly designated "emergency operating areas" to advance community response time and work. The AAA has also worked with County officials to identify leadership within senior communities to coordinate emergency planning and response activities and to develop and maintain a registry of at-risk elders.

Building on the concept of neighbor helping neighbor, the AAA also developed an informal emergency notification door hanger project. Following a disaster event, the senior or person with a disability simply hangs the door hanger on his or her door or in a visible window, signaling to community responders whether help is needed or not. To date, more than one million of the emergency door hangers have been distributed throughout the AAA's five-county service area. In recognition of its community-based coordination role, the AAA has

also been assigned a permanent seat at the Emergency Operations Center to assist in responding to emergency requests for food and water needs from the older population.

Key Challenges

Providing continuity of services to older evacuees as they move from shelters to other temporary housing is a significant challenge. AAAs have experienced difficulty locating older adults who need gap-filling services due to regulations that prevented the emergency response agencies from disclosing their new location once they had moved from the shelters to temporary housing. AAAs need to have access to their older adult clients in order to ensure that they get the services that they need. For example, older adults have encountered problems physically accessing Special Needs Shelters and FEMA temporary housing (e.g., stairs to a trailer's door may be too difficult to climb for an older adult with limited mobility).

Obtaining adequate resources in a timely manner has been a challenge to effective emergency planning and coordination, and consequently to responding to the needs of the aging population during disasters. AAAs need federal, state and local government financial assistance in order to actively participate in long-range emergency planning and to put in place the communications infrastructure required to better respond to the needs of older adults during disasters.

AoA has limited disaster funds and the nature of the government's fiscal year—which ends right in the midst of hurricane season—makes distribution that much more difficult. This is further complicated by the fact that older adults continue to need assistance in the aftermath of disasters, when initial resources may have dried up. Additionally, FEMA funds have been slow to reach agencies and as result have delayed payments to local providers. To the

degree that the process for receiving federal funding can be streamlined to allow AoA and FEMA to more quickly distribute funds to state and local aging agencies, it would enable AAAs to more easily obtain services from local provider organizations and secure critical relief supplies for older adults. In particular, AAAs have found it difficult to assist disaster victims in making the transition back into their homes due to a lack of resources available for temporary housing, home repairs and chore services.

Policy Recommendations

State and local government agencies continue to examine and refine their emergency plans to identify potential gaps and areas of weakness—many of which were so painfully brought to light in 2005, but have still been observed in subsequent disasters. These local reviews are likely to produce the most substantive policy changes to address the needs of the elderly and special needs populations.

However, there are some specific steps that can be taken at the federal level that would help to promote coordination between agencies and allow them to better serve the needs of older adults during disasters.

The demographic shift resulting from the aging of the baby boomers reinforces the need for communities of all sizes to begin to address a range of community planning issues that will have a direct impact on the aging population. **To help facilitate communities' overall preparedness to meet the needs of the growing aging population, n4a proposes the following:**

- 1) **Promote Federal, State, and Local Information Sharing:** There needs to be a consistent policy to ensure that FEMA registration information for the age 60 and older population is shared with SUAs and AAAs in federally declared disaster areas.

- 2) **Make Community-Level Special Needs Registries a High Priority:** Federal grant funding should be established through AoA to support community-level work by AAAs to implement emergency preparedness registry systems for older adults and special needs populations that utilize geographic mapping technology.

- 3) **Reinforce Existing Federal Policy to Formalize Coordination Plans:** Congress should build on the emergency preparedness provisions added to the Older Americans Act in 2006 by requiring that FEMA and local emergency preparedness agencies formalize coordination plans with the Aging Services Network, and specifically SUAs and AAAs.

- 4) **Create a DHS-AoA Interagency Education Program:** We encourage the Department of Homeland Security and AoA to establish an interagency program that would facilitate cross-agency training opportunities and provide on-the-ground orientation to both networks on how they can more effectively work together and better utilize each others resources during disaster planning, response and recovery efforts.

- 5) **Provide the Necessary Emergency Planning Funding:** Finally, we urge Congress to fulfill the promise of the Older Americans Act emergency planning provisions by appropriating funding to SUAs and AAAs to support these critical endeavors as authorized under Title IV Program Innovations. As Congress looks ahead to the reauthorization of the Older Americans Act in 2011, we encourage policymakers to reassess the OAA disaster assistance program

under Section 310 and consider changes that will allow AoA to provide more substantive and timely aid to the Aging Services Network in times of disaster.

Conclusion

Thank you, Chairman Kohl and Ranking Member Martinez, for holding today's hearing to call attention to the special needs of America's seniors as we continue to examine how to enhance federal, state and local disaster preparedness efforts. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.