

**US Senate Special Committee on Aging  
Hearing on Emergency Preparedness for Seniors  
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Amy B. Aiken from Miami-Dade Office of Emergency Management. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to share some of Miami-Dade County's disaster preparedness initiatives, particularly as they relate to some of our more vulnerable residents and I would also like to commend Senators Smith and Kohl and members of this committee for convening a hearing that is seeking to move forward disaster preparedness for seniors.

Miami-Dade County spans over 2,000 square miles, hosts a major airport, Florida's largest seaport, a nuclear power plant and has a resident population of 2.5 million.

During 2004, Miami-Dade County activated its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) four (4) times in six (6) weeks for hurricanes. And we did it again four (4) more times in 2005, so we've had some practice. While many of the initiatives about which I will speak today were developed because of our experience with hurricanes, Miami-Dade County utilizes an all-hazards approach for emergency management and must be ready for any disaster, not just hurricanes.

One of the principal lessons learned from the 2005 hurricane season was that no matter what happens in the County, it is and will ultimately be the County's responsibility to respond to and recover from any disaster that affects its vulnerable populations and the only way to do that is to have a coordinated human services plan. Back to back storms within a matter of weeks and widespread, extended power outages in 2005 raised our awareness that the programs Miami-Dade County already had in place were inadequate to care for our most vulnerable populations, particularly our senior residents during a disaster. Miami-Dade County has committed to developing the resources to improve our systems further.

While Miami-Dade County works diligently to fulfill its residents' needs, we realize that local government cannot respond to and recover from disaster on its own, particularly in relation to the many and varied individual needs that arise following a disaster. Many non-governmental agencies and individuals seek to assist, but if this assistance is not well coordinated, it may lead to duplication of efforts and gaps in services. Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) exists to coordinate such efforts. Miami-Dade County, in conjunction with the Alliance for Human Services, is re-establishing its VOAD, which is part of a national VOAD program. A revitalized VOAD with strong leadership will provide another resource to effectively respond to the needs of our most vulnerable residents.

The Help Us Help You campaign was developed by the County's Department of Human Services (DHS) to step up when other agencies who normally assist seniors were impacted, offline, and unable to serve their clientele. A media campaign alerted residents to call into our 311 call center to vocalize their needs. Within hours, DHS staff returned the phone calls and determined the appropriate

services that were needed. Many of the calls came from individuals, particularly seniors, who simply needed reassurance. Miami-Dade County has since established a telephone reassurance program so that individuals can register to receive a call, letting them know they are not alone during times of disaster. Other calls came from individuals who were displaced from their homes. Miami-Dade County, through DHS, made arrangements with local hotels and motels to provide short term housing for those individuals as well as for the residents occupying our post-storm shelters due to damaged homes. Developing pre-established relationships and signed memorandums of understanding between area hotels and Miami-Dade County is already underway for this season.

Many of the community based organizations (CBOs) that provide services to the elderly were offline due to effects of the hurricanes and others suffered limited operations. Miami-Dade County mandated that by June 1, 2006, each of the 247 CBOs that receive County funding are required to have a continuity of operations (COOP) plan to increase their ability to maintain essential services when impacted by any disaster, whether county-wide or agency specific. A series of Train the Trainer sessions regarding COOP was held. Participants included the contract officers assigned to each agency who will be the ones reviewing the plans. Technical assistance for completing the COOP was provided as well.

As part of the COOP plan, each agency was asked to identify another CBO within its immediate area and two (2) more outside of its immediate area that can potentially act as relocation sites or provide other resource support. Similar service providers are the best match, but any linkage with another agency is still vital to ensure continued operations. Miami-Dade County has termed this a triangulation of services. OEM, using geographic information services (GIS), mapped each CBO with a corresponding spreadsheet of addresses to identify all potential service providers and to allow the CBOs to pre-identify their partner agencies. Using census and property appraisal data, OEM mapped areas of vulnerable populations such as neighborhoods with high concentrations of elderly residents and public housing units. CBOs are being encouraged to adopt elderly high rise buildings or other similar facilities in their areas.

Miami-Dade County's Community Relations Board (CRB) maintains a listing of every faith-based organization in the County from those with congregations that number in the thousands to store front houses of worship. These faith-based organizations will be asked to identify the elderly members of their congregations and match them with a family or individual who will check on their status throughout a disaster. Faith-based organizations are provided with preparedness materials to share with their congregations and will be asked to collect disaster supply kit materials that can be distributed to the elderly pre-disaster.

Florida law mandates that all assisted living facilities (ALFs) and nursing homes have disaster plans in place that are reviewed by their respective counties' Office

of Emergency Management (OEM) and are enforced by the Agency for Health Care Administration (AHCA). As part of their annual inspections, fire prevention inspectors in Miami-Dade County also request a copy of the letter stating that the plan has been reviewed by Miami-Dade's OEM.

These plans require contracts with water vendors, a seven (7) day food supply, two (2) alternate facilities in the event of an evacuation or facility damage and two (2) transportation providers to move clientele. There are over 800 ALFs in Miami-Dade County and 56 nursing homes. Three (3) of those nursing homes are located in evacuation zones. While to date Miami-Dade County has been spared having to evacuate entire nursing homes, partial evacuations of the most critical patients in those nursing homes have occurred. I mention this because having adequate plans in place is the first step in being prepared. Training on and testing of the plans is the next crucial step that is often overlooked. Deficiencies in plans need to be identified pre-event so that corrective measures can be implemented well before any type of disaster.

Florida law also mandates that each county maintains a special needs registry. These are databases of homebound residents who may need assistance with daily living, require skilled nursing care, or need life-saving medical equipment dependent upon electricity. In Miami-Dade County, the level of care required, type of transportation needed, and receiving facility is pre-identified upon registration and this information is provided to the registrant. Evacuating seniors with special needs is a time consuming process so a call down of the registered individuals is conducted to ask individuals if they would like to be moved well in advance of a general population evacuation order. While every attempt will be made to evacuate last minute, unregistered callers, those who are previously registered will have priority.

Each year at the beginning of hurricane season, Florida Power and Light includes in its billings information about registering for the special needs program. Every community preparedness event conducted by OEM includes information and multilingual applications for the program, which are also provided to those agencies that deal specifically with this population year round.

Realizing that many residents, in particular seniors, will not evacuate without their pets, Miami-Dade County opened its first pet-friendly shelter last year. A lone cockatoo took advantage of this facility during Tropical Storm Rita, was joined by 15 other pets during Hurricane Wilma, and made the local news. Miami-Dade County is working with Miami-Dade County Public Schools to identify additional locations for pet-friendly shelters throughout the County.

Miami-Dade County has hired an upper level Senior Advocate whose primary function is to strengthen the coordination and connectivity among County services, CBOs and other stakeholders serving the elderly. This individual will also facilitate the development and implementation of an on-going education

program for elders and their caretakers to increase knowledge and access to the continuum of services available.

Miami-Dade County has a robust Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program. Neighborhood associations, businesses, and other cohesive groups receive training in basic disaster response skills so they can respond to the immediate needs of their communities following a disaster, before traditional first responders arrive. This is a significant resource to assist seniors in need post-disaster. One of the local university CERT teams has elaborated their plan to systematically conduct wellness checks of a surrounding neighborhood immediately upon the “all clear” from local officials.

Miami-Dade OEM employs a full-time emergency management coordinator whose primary function is community education and awareness. Seniors and people with special needs are priority populations for outreach initiatives. This staff person works in conjunction with other community groups such as American Red Cross, CBOs, and municipalities to deliver a clear, consistent message. Miami-Dade’s message has and will continue to be that disaster preparedness is everyone’s responsibility and everyone should be prepared to be self-sufficient for at least three (3) – fourteen (14) days.

Low income elderly residents in Miami-Dade County can take advantage of the County’s residential shuttering program. This program enables homeowners to receive custom made shutters at no cost and assistance, if needed, to put up and take down the protective panels when a storm is threatening. I am pleased to report that this program has expanded into the population of people with disabilities as well.

South Florida has the most stringent building codes in the nation for windstorm protection. In addition to its stringent building codes, Miami-Dade County’s Local Mitigation Strategy (LMS) has completed \$36 million in windstorm mitigation projects and another \$128 million in flood mitigation. Hundreds more projects are already in progress or under development. During the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, not a single facility mitigated through the LMS incurred any damage other than a few loose roof tiles or scraped paint. Mitigation works.

Other hurricane prone areas should be encouraged to revisit their building codes and consider replicating South Florida’s. Areas prone to other types of disasters such as earthquakes, wildfires or flooding should consider a review and possible strengthening of building codes specific to the disasters most likely to occur in their particular area. Building codes work.

Miami-Dade County has learned that the only way to ensure the prompt, coordinated response that our community has come to expect and deserves is to continue to strengthen partnerships with local, state, and federal governmental agencies, public and private agencies, non-profits organizations, and most

importantly, our 2.5 million residents. Disaster preparedness is everyone's responsibility. However, all cities, counties, and states are not the same and these differences must be considered throughout all phase of emergency management from preparedness and mitigation to response and recovery.

I invite you Mr. Chairman and members of this committee to visit Miami-Dade County's Office of Emergency Management and its Emergency Operations Center (EOC). We appreciate the visits from Senators Martinez and Nelson and look forward to visits from any other members. Miami-Dade County is ready and willing to share with and learn from any efforts that will enhance disaster preparedness for all.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify and more importantly to be a part of a process that is seeking to move forward disaster preparedness for our seniors.

## **Attachments**









