

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement
"Inclusive Disaster Management: Improving Preparedness, Response, and Recovery"
November 18, 2021

The hearing will come to order. Today's hearing will examine gaps in disaster management that cause people with disabilities and older adults to be overlooked. Whether it is hurricanes, wildfires or the next pandemic, people with disabilities and older adults must have a seat at the planning table. This hearing is particularly timely for a state like Pennsylvania which has suffered through devastating floods and tornados just this summer, spawned by the remnants of Hurricane Ida, part of a record-setting Atlantic hurricane season. This hearing also comes after more than 190 nations reaffirm their commitment to take into the account of needs of people with disabilities at the Glasgow summit on climate change. People with disabilities and older adults are often the ones hit hardest by disasters, but they are not given a voice in the management process. The 2018 Camp Fire in California serves as a stark reminder of this fact—The Los Angeles Times reported shortly after that fire that 53 of the 69 deaths, 53 of 69 deaths, were people over the age of 65.

To ensure the safety of people with disabilities and older adults, they must be included in each phase of disaster management. That means in the preparation phase, response phase, the recovery and mitigation efforts that are undertaken. That is why I introduced a piece of legislation to deal with some of these issues. It's got a long name. The Real Emergency Access for Aging and Disability Inclusion for Disasters Act, or the REAADI [READY] for

Disasters Act, this is bill S. 2658. This bill would ensure that people with disabilities and older adults have a voice at every stage of disaster management. It would also require accessible information about planning for disasters, and making sure that information is available to everyone, including those with disabilities. And it would make sure that shelters and temporary housing are accessible to older adults and people with disabilities.

But it's not only natural disasters we need to be concerned with—the COVID-19 pandemic has made it that clear disasters are not limited to weather events. Roughly one-quarter of the 760,000 deaths during this pandemic have been in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, where most residents are older adults or people with disabilities. The bottom line is we must continue to invest in bold policy solutions to save lives and strengthen communities. The Build Back Better bill will include a once-in-a-generation expansion of home and community-based services that is based upon a bill I introduced, the Better Care Better Jobs bill. What we're trying to do there is to create better jobs for those who are doing this important work, home and community-based services work, better care for seniors and people with disabilities who are served and better support for family caregivers. These investments will mean better preparation for disasters and emergencies. Today, we will hear testimony about how better access to home and community-based services can help save lives during a disaster. We will also hear crucial testimony that people affected by disasters need to maintain their health care throughout the response and recovery phases of disaster management. The Build Back Better legislation and the recently passed infrastructure bill will make historic investments in reducing the speed and effects of climate change.

All of these bills are a recognition of what the science is telling us—that climate change is causing natural disasters the likes of which we have never seen before. Unprecedented weather, health and man-made disasters make it necessary to have a whole-community approach to emergencies. People with disabilities and older adults must have a seat at the table when we’re doing that planning. As we often hear, representation matters and in the disability and aging communities there is an old expression: “nothing about us, without us.” That should hold true for disaster planning as well. And I want to say to Ranking Member Scott, before I turn to him, I’m happy to join you on your bipartisan FEED Act, S. 19, which would make it easier for small and mid-size restaurants to provide nutritious meals to people during disasters. I thank you and thank you for introducing the bill.