

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl – May 18, 2006  
Special Committee on Aging Hearing  
Caring for Seniors in a National Emergency: Can We Do Better?

I call this hearing to order and welcome our witnesses. Last September, as the nation still reeled from the tragic and shameful images of seniors abandoned during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, this committee held a hearing on how to prepare for the next disaster. Today we return to that topic, determined that we never again leave our parents and grandparents to face an emergency alone.

Today is not about pointing fingers for past tragedies. Today is about looking forward – hurricane season is just around the corner, the threat of terrorism remains, and the potential for an avian flu pandemic looms. We all agree we let our seniors down after Hurricane Katrina. But, as sorry as we all are, are we any more ready for the next hurricane, or attack, or disaster?

We know now that cookie cutter emergency plans are of little use to seniors, especially those who depend on others for assistance in their daily lives. We must put in place a concrete strategy that recognizes and masters the challenges of keeping seniors out of harm's way. This Committee is steadfast in its pursuit of that goal; we hope that we will learn today that the administration is equally committed.

We will hear from a senior who was forced to navigate Katrina without assistance and from a nurse who has helped countless seniors after hurricanes. Also with us are the Government Accountability Office, the Miami-Dade Office of Emergency Management, and a renowned geriatrician. We look forward to their recommendations.

I am particularly interested to hear testimony from the Department of Homeland Security, the lead Federal agency for emergency preparedness. We're happy that Dan Sutherland is here from the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, and we look forward to hearing what the department is doing to prepare seniors for emergencies.

We expect to work with the Department on some common sense solutions. We must do a better job in telling older people what supplies and plans they need to have in place if a terrorist attack or flu pandemic hits. As a start, my office has developed a "tip sheet", and DHS should follow with pamphlets, public announcements, and specific direction for seniors and the agencies that serve them. DHS also should direct states and local governments to plan, train and practice evacuations and sheltering in place exercises that specifically target seniors. And DHS should require hospitals and nursing homes to plan ahead for evacuations, and fund training for first responders to help seniors who live at home and may be unable to evacuate.

Our office will be developing a report outlining recommendations from our witnesses and other groups. I hope the Department of Homeland Security will take these ideas seriously and turn them into action.

Our lack of preparation for seniors after last summer's hurricanes – and the terrible price we paid in lives and suffering – is a national tragedy. That tragedy is compounded if we ignore the painful lessons of the past. We need specific plans, programs, and information for all seniors facing emergencies. And we need the commitment and energy of a DHS determined, as this Committee is, never again to desert our seniors when they need us most.

We look forward to hearing from our witnesses and now turn to Chairman Smith for his opening statement.