

U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY



CHAIRMAN Special Committee on Aging

Chairman Bob Casey's Opening Statement "Before Disaster Strikes: Planning for Older Americans and People with Disabilities in All Phases of Emergencies"

The Hearing will come to order. The Senate Special Committee on Aging will come to order, today. We Welcome those who are here for our fifth hearing of the 118th Congress about including older adults and people with disabilities in emergency management and response. In the two years since the Committee held a hearing on this topic, we have witnessed devastating emergencies and disasters across the country. While all Americans are affected by disasters and emergencies, older adults and people with disabilities are disproportionately affected.

The most devastating of recent disasters, of course is the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 75 percent of COVID-19 deaths – some 857,000 - were adults over the age of 65. So, 75% of the deaths were in the age category of over the age of 65. And at the same time, I should say, those with developmental disabilities were nearly three times more likely to die from COVID-19 than those without a disability. While the pandemic has had a disastrous effect on older adults and people with disabilities, natural and man-made disasters also have a disproportionate effect on them.

Last year, Hurricane, Hurricane Ian killed at least 150 people in Florida and North Carolina, with nearly two thirds of those who lost their lives were over the age of 65 years old. And as you will hear from one of our witnesses, the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio which caused about 5,000 people to flee their homes in both Ohio and Pennsylvania, had a profound impact on people with disabilities.

In this Committee's recent joint report with the Senate Finance Committee, this is a copy I am holding up *Left in the Dark*, we recommended that older adults and people with disabilities be included as an essential part of the entire emergency planning process. In the report we stressed the importance of making the resources to prepare and respond to emergencies available to all who need them, including of course older adults and people with disabilities.

As we will hear from witnesses today, one of the most essential resources during an emergency is of course information, information! People with disabilities and older adults need accurate, accessible, and comprehensive information to plan for, and respond to, emergency situations.

That is why, I, along with 11 of my colleagues, including Sens. Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Warren, and Fetterman from this Committee, have introduced the *Real Emergency Access for Aging and Disability Inclusion for Disasters Act*, for short, that goodness we have an acronym the *REAADI for Disasters Act*, REAADI for disasters act. This bill would ensure that people with disabilities and older adults are included in disaster preparation and that their needs are considered during the response and recovery efforts. It would also ensure that the civil rights of older adults and people with disabilities are not violated during disaster emergencies. So, whether it is a pandemic, a natural disaster, or a human-made emergency, older adults and people with disabilities need to be considered in both planning and response.

I look forward to hearing recommendations from our witnesses about how we can ensure disaster planning, response and recovery are truly, truly inclusive. I now turn to Ranking Member Braun, for your opening remarks