

## STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN GORDON H. SMITH

U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing  
“Caring for Seniors in a National Emergency: Can We Do Better?”  
May 18, 2006

Good morning.

Senator Kohl, I appreciate being here today to revisit one of the most important topics this Committee has looked into during the past year.

Since the tragic events on the Gulf Coast last year, we in Congress have devoted much of our time to helping our fellow Americans who were displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita get back on their feet. We are continuing the long process of rebuilding those areas of the Gulf region that have been so ravaged by these terrible storms.

The Baltimore Sun on Sunday examined difficulties that the 200,000 people currently living in New Orleans are facing when accessing medical care from the city's devastated health care system. Damage from Hurricane Katrina has reduced the number of hospital beds in the city from 2,300 to 500, and Charity Hospital, the city's hospital for the uninsured, is not expected to reopen for years. Meanwhile, the uninsured rate in the city has increased from about 20 percent to 40 percent, largely because many people have lost jobs that provided health insurance. In addition, out of 4,500 physicians who worked in New Orleans before Katrina, only about 1,200 have returned.

While we must continue to work to ensure New Orleans is a safe city to return to, the past few months have also been a time to examine the preparedness of our federal, state and local governments to deal with such disasters in the future.

Last October, this Committee held a hearing entitled Preparing Early, Acting Quickly: Meeting the Needs of Older Americans During A Disaster. We heard from witnesses who described older Americans' special needs that make them particularly vulnerable during an emergency. A key lesson that came out of our hearing was that the government at all levels must do more to ensure the health and safety of older Americans during a disaster. Many in this population are extremely vulnerable and it is the government's responsibility to make certain that adequate steps have been taken to identify those in need, evacuate seniors to a safe place and provide appropriate care once displaced.

The October hearing also pointed out that there are other substantial issues that still need to be addressed. Issues of specific concern are the double-counting of emergency services, trouble identifying individuals who have special needs and making sure that funding is flexible for an all-hazards approach to disaster preparedness.

As we listen to the testimony of our witnesses today, we will hear details about the responses to hurricanes Katrina and Rita. However we must also consider the myriad of other natural and man-made disasters a frail senior may face. Seniors in the Midwest may need to prepare for tornados, while in the West seniors may need to prepare for earthquakes. This is why during our last hearing I found the “all-hazards” approach to disaster preparedness so valuable.

Simply put an “all-hazards” approach focuses more on coordinating efforts toward any disaster rather than preparing for a specific disaster. By doing this, an agency can be prepared to provide for:

- Effective coordination of activities among the organizations having a management/response role;
- Early warning and clear instructions to all concerned organizations and individuals if a crisis occurs; and
- Continued assessment of actual and potential consequences of the crisis at hand.

As I stated in October, there is no doubt that disaster preparedness for older Americans poses a daunting challenge. However, I believe hearings like this one will shed light on the difficulties we have had in the past to find solutions for future disasters.

Large-scale natural disasters like the hurricanes that struck the Gulf Coast stretch our federal, state and local response capabilities to their absolute limits. I hope the testimony today from our distinguished witnesses allows this Committee to learn about disaster preparedness and enables us to move forward and protect our most vulnerable citizens during emergencies.

I thank all of you for coming to share your expertise and look forward to your comments.

Thank you.