

STATEMENT OF JENNIFER PIPA

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DISASTER PROGRAMS

AMERICAN RED CROSS

BEFORE THE US SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

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UNITED STATES SENATE

Good afternoon, Chairman Scott, Ranking member Gillibrand and distinguished members of the Committee. Thank you for the privilege of testifying before you today on behalf of the American Red Cross. We commend the Committee for holding this much-needed hearing on the unique challenges facing older Americans and how to help them prepare for disasters.

My name is Jennifer Pipa, and I serve as the vice president of Disaster Programs for the American Red Cross. In this role, I oversee our national preparedness, response, and recovery programs.

Among the most significant challenges the American Red Cross encounters in our disaster work is meeting the needs of older Americans impacted by disasters. Nearly 20 percent of Americans are in the 65-and-older age group, and the current growth of the population ages 65 and older is unprecedented in U.S. history. This increase in the population of older Americans comes at a time when more frequent and costly disasters are becoming the "new normal" in the United States. The intersection of these trends—an aging population and significantly more disasters—should concern all of us.

Recent research has found that older adults are more vulnerable and experience more casualties after natural disasters compared to other age groups. In 2020, members of the American Red Cross Scientific Advisory Council and the American Academy of Nursing Policy Expert Round Table on Emergency/Disaster Preparedness for Older Adults produced a report entitled "Closing the Gaps: Advancing Disaster Preparedness, Response and Recovery for Older Adults." Among other finding, the report documents a growing demand for services among older Americans due to the increased prevalence of chronic health conditions, living in social isolation, and experiencing declines in cognitive and physical functioning. It is imperative that we continue to understand the growing needs of our aging population and create services and programs to meet older Americans where they are and help them to continue to prepare for any disaster.

Following Hurricane Sandy in 2012, the New York Times reported that nearly half of those who died because of the storm were age 65 or older. Sadly, many of those who lost their lives, drowned at home, or died from storm-related injuries. The 2018 Camp Fire, which burned for 18 days in Paradise, California, resulted in 85 deaths. Many of

the victims were elderly or had disabilities. The average age of those who died was 72. In 2023, more than two-thirds of the 102 confirmed victims of the 2023 Maui fires were over the age of 60. Last year, Hurricane Helene caused at least 250 deaths in the United States, with many being elderly individuals. The storm's impact was particularly severe on older adults. In North Carolina, for instance, two out of every three deaths from Hurricane Helene were among adults aged 60 or older.

As part of the world's largest humanitarian network, the American Red Cross is called to help communities prepare, respond, and recover from disasters. We make a vital difference for families and communities in the United States and around the world who are coping with the impacts of disasters, including more frequent and intense storms, heavier rainfall, extended droughts, extreme heat, and devastating wildfires.

The American Red Cross works actively alongside partners at all levels, including state and federal government, to execute our mission of alleviating human suffering in the face of emergencies. This includes our role in delivering national response and preparedness programs across all 50 states and territories, and our efforts every day within local communities, to ensure those who need us the most are best prepared.

Over the course of our nearly 145-year history, the American Red Cross has adapted to meet the changing needs of the people we serve, but the mission of the American Red Cross continues to be driven by the mobilization of the power of volunteers and through the generosity of our donors. Red Cross volunteers and staff work to deliver vital services every day across the country to help individuals, families, businesses, and schools be better prepared for life's challenges. Each year we respond to more than 60,000 disasters, a vast majority of which are home fires, as well as the recurrence of the more extreme-weather events such as wildfires, extreme heat, hurricanes, and flooding. We also collect and distribute about 40 percent of the nation's blood supply; teach lifesaving skills; and provide more than 240,000 services to veterans, military members, and their families annually. Whether the need is large or small, the American Red Cross will be there.

The increase in frequency, and impact from disasters is challenging the American Red Cross to think differently around the way we fulfill our mission. This challenge has created an environment of opportunity to innovate and adapt the way we deliver our existing services and programs. Our ability to engage and empower communities before, during, and after disasters is central to our success. One of the keys to that success is community mobilization. At the American Red Cross, we support communities and work alongside them to build resilience by empowering community members to prepare for disasters and support one another when disasters occur.

As we see a growth in the number of older Americans across the United States, we need to understand that the effects that disasters have on older Americans, do not end when the storm is over. People over 65 make up nearly 10 percent of American Red Cross emergency shelter populations after disaster evacuations have lifted. Our responders often encounter elderly disaster survivors living in badly damaged homes or in dwellings without power and water. These survivors regularly express fear that they will lose their homes and property if they leave, and, in some cases, we encounter older survivors who

have not been able to manage the task associated with getting to a shelter or finding safer temporary housing.

I have sadly experienced many disasters. However, one experience in Fort Myers Florida has really stayed with me. In the days after Hurricane Ian had made landfall, the American Red Cross was out serving the communities by opening shelters, providing hot meals, as well as care and comfort to the thousands who had been impacted. I was driving around the Ft Myers area delivering water and snacks to people who were cleaning up and came across this wonderful elderly woman, Jackie who was in her completely destroyed manufactured home, searching through all of her personal items to find a few irreplaceable items that she treasured. Jackie was a retired home economics teacher who had moved from upstate NY to the Ft Myers area with her husband when she retired.

Jackie and her husband had done everything right -- they were monitoring the weather and listening to local and state officials and following their directions. They knew that a hurricane was coming, and they heeded the evacuation orders and moved inland to make sure that both she and her husband would remain safe, and they did not return to their home until they were told it was safe to do so. When I spoke to Jackie, one of the things she shared with me was that she was missing her neighborhood friends and grieving the loss of one of her neighbors who had chosen not to evacuate and had lost his life.

Jackie shared with me one of the most difficult things she was struggling with was the loss of her social network, and the likelihood of never seeing those neighbors that she cared for so deeply. Jackie reminded me when we connected later that week, that her life had immeasurably changed because of a disaster. Every day Jackie is reminded she is a survivor of a disaster by the simple little things that she used to take for granted, things like going to the grocery store (it was destroyed in the hurricane), stopping by the local branch of her bank (again destroyed by the hurricane), and the most important to her was finding a new doctor, after her current doctor decided not to come back to Fort Myers to rebuild.

We know that individuals and families typically have better outcomes when they have prepared for disasters before they happen, and while Jackie was making great strides in her recovery, she is an example that even the best prepared of us may still struggle after a disaster. This is where the Red Cross plays a vital role in ensuring individuals, families, and communities are better prepared for what disasters they may face.

We have numerous preparedness programs to help communities become better prepared for disasters, including:

- Be Red Cross Ready – a national, standardized, free preparedness education curriculum for adults taught by a certified presenter. Uses a whole community approach to preparedness education, by providing safety information for older adults and individuals with disabilities, access, or functional needs. This aims to reduce the perceived barriers to taking preparedness actions by focusing on a step-by-step approach that is manageable, action-oriented, and affordable.

- Home Fire Campaign Home Visits – through these preparedness visits we serve all clients, but especially for older adults there are recommendations to keep mobility devices, hearing aids, medications, etc. nearby the sleeping area to grab and go with egress from a fire, or suggestions to move their master bedroom to the lower level of the home if stairs pose a significant challenge. We also offer accessible fire safety equipment (smoke alarms) for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing and people who lose upper registry hearing as they age, so many older adults take advantage of this offering within the program framework.
- Caregivers Preparedness Checklist- people who care for others have a unique role in preparing both themselves and the ones they take care of. In collaboration with AARP, Red Cross developed this checklist to help caregivers plan for and respond to disasters and to ensure their family members are supported during a disaster.
- Building Your Support Network – the Red Cross recommends that older adults create a personal network made up of multiple individuals who will check in on them in an emergency, to ensure their wellness and to provide assistance if needed. This checklist contains a list of seven important items for folks to consider.
- Emergency App – the app uses three questions to provide customized content to those individuals who state that they have an older adult in their household for the hurricane and wildfire planning sections.

In times of disaster, the American Red Cross stands as a beacon of hope and strength, grounded in compassion and service. From emergency response and recovery to blood services and our support of the armed forces, our impact is both immediate and enduring. We are equally committed to supporting older Americans, providing reliable resources and assistance when needed and offering meaningful ways to give back through volunteer service.

More than 40 percent of our volunteers are over the age of 60. These individuals are not only helping their communities prepare for and recover from disasters — they are leading the way. Their service reflects the values of dedication, responsibility, and neighborliness that strengthen our country in times of crisis. Older Americans are not just recipients of help; they are central to our ability to deliver it.