

# U.S. SENATOR BOB CASEY

---



**RANKING MEMBER** *Special Committee on Aging*

---

## **Sen. Casey's Opening Statement Hearing on Disaster Preparedness and Response for Older Americans September 20, 2017**

“Chairman Collins, thank you very much for having this very important hearing, especially at this time. I join the Chairman in thanking the work of those who have done emergency response tasks over many, many days now. The countless volunteers who have helped them throughout the many days of challenge—we are grateful for that work and we join in thanking them for doing that great work.

“Together, they have worked endless hours over these last several weeks to save the lives of people in Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and now folks in Puerto Rico—who are facing a difficult number of days ahead; and we are thinking of them and praying for them at this time. To say that their work has been heroic is inadequate. There is no way to describe that kind of commitment, that kind of heroism.

“Unfortunately, we are here today because we know that despite great efforts by a lot of good people across the country, older Americans and individuals with disabilities face extraordinary challenges in a disaster—and again, that’s an understatement. So many of us were both outraged and enraged when we saw what happened in Florida—people died, seniors died in the midst of this crisis. We are also heartbroken for the loss of life and the loss that those families suffered. In this case it was because of something as simple as a lack of air conditioning—something that many of us take for granted every day. It’s hard to comprehend the sadness that will engulf those families and those communities. So that’s one of many challenges that we will speak to today.

“Just yesterday, Senator Nelson—who has done great work in his home state of Florida, dealing with these issues—said the following, ‘one life lost is one too many.’

“I’m proud—and I know Chairman Collins as well is proud—that we’ve joined him in introducing legislation that would do the following. It would require the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to establish a national advisory committee on seniors and disasters, a 15-member panel would be appointed and made up of federal and local agency officials as well as non-federal health care professionals with experience in disaster response. This is a good, bipartisan bill and we should pass it. Both Senators Nelson and Rubio have introduced it. So that’s one thing that we can do together to better plan for and respond to these challenges in the future.

“And I—like all Americans—were just stunned by the viral photo, that the Chairman just showed of the nursing home and the water that was rising around those seniors in an assisted living facility near Houston where they sitting in waist-deep water awaiting rescue.

“These are folks who, to say is our greatest generation doesn’t adequately capture This is our greatest generation. They fought our wars, they worked in our factories, they built the middle class, and they gave us the kind of life that we take for granted sometimes. They’ve sacrificed so much and they have lived lives of quiet dignity. We have a sacred obligation to them—to make sure that those scenes that were depicted in that photograph and that happened in Florida never happen again.

“Just as the Chairman said, all the good lessons that were learned in the aftermath of Katrina, we have to implement better practices, best practices to make sure that we learn from these recent disasters as well. So, we need to make sure that we are doing everything possible to learn from these tragedies and we also have to make sure that we are focused, on a day like today, on better policy. So that’s why we gathered today with such a great panel of witnesses.

“These witnesses bring not just experiences from the recent past, but in many cases experiences from years of experience. From Hurricane Katrina to Hurricane Harvey. They have faced the double whammy of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee back in 2011. As well as the four hurricanes in six weeks that ravaged Florida in 2004.

“We’ve learned—and they’ve learned even more—from each of these experiences. As we will hear from our witnesses incident management infrastructure is more robust in some important areas like hospitals. That’s good news, it means we’ve learned lessons to implement those changes. Coordination efforts in advance of storms have improved, and there are more comprehensive emergency response requirements being implemented for nursing homes so that seniors will be better protected.

“But, we have a long way to go to make sure that we get this right. Older citizens should not suffer for days and then die in unbearable heat. No person with a disability should have trouble following evacuation orders because of inaccessible transportation or shelters. And, it should go without saying, no senior should fear drowning in their home—no matter where they live.

“Our witnesses here today will explain how we can do better. Because we must do better. We have a sacred obligation to do better.

“I want to thank the witnesses for coming to talk about their experiences, their expertise and their passion for these issues. And I want to thank Chairman Collins for gathering us here today.”

###