

United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

(202) 224-5364

September 26, 2017

The Honorable Thomas Price, M.D.
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, D.C. 20201

The Honorable Elaine Duke
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

The Honorable William B. "Brock" Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
Washington, D.C. 20472

The Honorable Robert Kadlec, M.D.
Asst Secretary for Preparedness & Response
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Price, Acting Secretary Duke, Administrator Long, and Assistant Secretary Kadlec:

We urge a swift and strong federal response to the growing humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricane Maria. Media reports suggest that the situation is dire, particularly for vulnerable, older residents. As Chairman and Ranking Member of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, we urge the Administration to heed the lessons of the recent hurricane response efforts in Florida and Texas and take all available steps to prioritize seniors in the response to this devastating storm. Seniors must be quickly identified and resources deployed to ensure that no older American is left in unbearable heat without air conditioning or without water and food as response efforts continue.

Last week, the Senate Special Committee on Aging held a hearing on disaster preparedness and response for older Americans, following the deaths of seniors in a Florida nursing home after Hurricane Irma and the viral photo of seniors in an assisted living facility in Texas sitting in waist-deep water awaiting rescue after Hurricane Harvey. These are deeply disturbing and avoidable outcomes. During this recovery period, it is even more important to multiply our efforts and deploy sufficient resources to support and rescue seniors. Our hearing witnesses testified that too often seniors survive the storm, only to die or face severe adverse health outcomes after the storm because of untenable conditions, including searing heat and lack of air-conditioning.

There is the opportunity to act now to prevent further death and harm in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands if resources are promptly deployed that prioritize not only acute health care facilities, but nursing homes, assisted living facilities, and community-based seniors. Older Americans deserve no less than an all-hands-on-deck commitment to doing everything possible to reach them and care for them in this time of crisis.

Among the short-term recommendations for action highlighted at our hearing were the following:

- 1) Prioritize nursing homes and assisted living facilities in power restoration and the deployment of generators.
- 2) Use federal data to help identify seniors both for rescue and for prioritizing power restoration.
 - Helpful federal data include, for example, Medicare data that can identify seniors who rely upon electricity-dependent medical and assistive equipment, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development data that can be used to identify where seniors reside, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs data on older veterans, and multiple other federal data sources.
- 3) Include older Americans' representatives and advocates at the table in deploying response and recovery resources.

In the longer term, we look forward to engaging with you on ensuring that facilities that serve seniors are well prepared to respond to disasters, including a plan for addressing the critical issue of power. In particular, we are interested in what changes the Departments will make based on what we have learned this hurricane season to ensure that as a nation, we are doing everything possible to protect our seniors.

Please advise us on the steps you are taking consistent with the recommendations outlined above. Following the immediate response to Hurricane Maria, we respectfully request your written after-action report on seniors and this hurricane season. Thank you for your efforts to help with the ongoing recovery efforts.



Susan M. Collins
Chairman

Sincerely,



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Ranking Member