



B. J. Walker, Commissioner

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TESTIMONY OF

MARIA GREENE, DIRECTOR

**GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES
DIVISION OF AGING SERVICES**

BEFORE THE

**U. S. SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
HEARING ON**

***PREPARING EARLY, ACTING QUICKLY: MEETING THE NEEDS OF OLDER
AMERICANS DURING A DISASTER***

October 5, 2005

**Senate Hart Office Building, Room 216
Washington, D.C.**

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Good morning Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Kohl, and distinguished Members of the Committee. My name is Maria Greene and I am the Director of the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Aging Services, designated as the State Agency on Aging (often called the State Unit on Aging). It is my pleasure to talk with you today about Georgia's Emergency Preparedness plan as it relates to older adults and people with disabilities.

I would like to share with you brief messages as they relate to emergency preparedness. The organization of the Department of Human Resources is unique in its ability to respond to the needs of citizens. We have integrated and coordinated plans that have been tested and improved upon. Georgia responded quickly and resourcefully in assisting people fleeing from hurricane ravaged states and we have new lessons learned to incorporate into our planning.

Along with Aging Services, the Department is an integrated human services agency that includes divisions of Public Health, the Mental Health State Authority, and Family and Children Services. The coordinated efforts of the Department, other state agencies, local governments, and private sector organizations comprise our state's emergency plans.

Additionally, the Division of Aging Services partners with the U.S. Administration on Aging by assigning a State Aging Disaster Officer to participate with federal aging staff

on disaster preparedness. The Older Americans Act envisions a comprehensive and coordinated array of services, particularly as it relates to information, screening assessment, counseling and referral, and specific programs related to health promotion, family caregiver support, legal services, long-term care ombudsman, prevention of elder abuse and neglect.

In conjunction with the Department, the Area Agencies on Aging have county, city, regional and state emergency preparedness plans. The plans include the coordination of first responder tasks with the local EMS, law enforcement and county officials. The Area Agency on Aging (AAA) staff identifies "at risk" older adults and people with disabilities that receive services through the AAA. These individuals would need assistance to evacuate in an emergency or will need medical assistance for health related problems and have no immediate family caregiver to aid them. Citizens who do not receive public benefits but are in need of assistance before or after a crisis are encouraged to register with the local EMS or law enforcement agency. Our protocol was put to test during an after hours chemical accident at a laboratory in the metropolitan area. Citizens in the vicinity needed to evacuate. The local aging service provider had a special needs list of people who receive our services and are in need of assistance during an emergency. The client listing is updated quarterly and shared with local EMS and law enforcement. The care managers had a copy of the client list in their homes and were ready to help when the "staff telephone tree" was activated. Everyone was assisted to safety. One lesson learned from this experience was the need for automobile cell phone chargers due to batteries running down and no immediate access to buildings.

During June 2004, the Division of Aging Services conducted emergency preparedness training for Area Agencies on Aging emergency coordinators as part of its Baldrige Criteria quality improvement initiative. *Emergency Management and Disaster Assistance: Roles and Responsibilities for the Aging Network* included presentations by DHR Emergency Operations Command Center officials, Division Planning and Evaluation staff, Coastal Georgia Area Agency on Aging staff on their local experiences with emergency preparedness plans and legal issues for the 2004 G-8 Summit held at Sea

Island, Georgia. The training provided information on addressing emergency preparation for clients with special needs. The AAA Emergency Coordinators and AAA staff conducted additional meetings to further develop their local emergency plans.

Most recently Georgia was able to assist individuals displaced from the states impacted by the Hurricanes. Governor Perdue, Commissioner Walker and I were at Dobbins Air Force Base when people were air lifted from the Gulf States. Many of the people were elderly and disabled. During the chaos of a disaster of this magnitude it is understandable that many people arrived and were quickly placed in shelters, hospitals and facilities. It was not immediately known where all individuals were placed. The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program, the Office of Regulatory Services, the Georgia Advocacy Office, the Community Service Boards (Community Mental Health Centers) and Area Agencies on Aging have worked tirelessly to identify displaced individuals placed in facilities. These individuals have been reunited with families, moved to more appropriate home and community services and assisted in the facilities where they choose to remain.

Georgia has the third largest number of evacuees in the nation and according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), over 40,000 heads of household are registered in our state. Many fine examples of emergency response developed from our work. Nursing home and personal care home associations and mental health hospitals monitored their bed vacancies for use by individuals displaced by the disaster. Senior Centers generously volunteered to be used as rest areas and lunch locations for persons regardless of age. Faith-based organizations and private sector entities partnered with government. The State created Joint Resource Recovery Centers (JRRCs) Centers where one-stop access for services could occur. With the leadership of our state agencies, three JRRCs were established in Cobb, Gwinnett, and Fulton counties and served over 15,700 individuals. Georgia embraced flexibility for benefits and developed Assessment Teams to go to hotels where large numbers of displaced persons were staying. The team members were comprised of staff from the Department including the aging and disabilities networks.

While our entire Aging Network remained on alert to serve victims of the hurricanes, the Atlanta Regional Commission Area Agency on Aging, the Middle Georgia Area Agency on Aging, the Northeast Georgia Area Agency on Aging, and their service providers and volunteers devoted many hours to assess, identify and process displaced persons. The ARC Area Agency on Aging assisted the American Red Cross in training Aging Network volunteers for case assessment. Years ago, the AAA had developed its Information and Referral system to include Elder Services Program (ESP) software to match individuals of all ages with the resources they were requesting. The database currently contains 16,761 statewide resources that can be accessed by all AAAs. Such foresight proved useful in disaster response as the Aging Network appeared to be one of the few entities providing case management to ensure that individuals received comprehensive information and assistance concerning available resources.

During a crisis we all feel that the bulk of our work is happening at that point in time. We are learning that the assistance after the crisis especially by human services organizations is crucial.

During the time of crisis, so many people are at their best, but others are at their worst. Unscrupulous people will use disaster to put money into their own pockets; money intended for those who are suffering. The Adult Protective Services Program and Elder Abuse Prevention Specialists were called upon to investigate and intervene on cases of suspected abuse, fraud and exploitation of Hurricane victims. In the future our revised emergency preparedness plan will include additional planning to prevent elder abuse before it starts. Also as a result of consumer fraud and exploitation the increased need for Elderly Legal Assistance has become very apparent. The Institute of Continuing Legal Education of Georgia of the State Bar of Georgia will conduct a special training to lawyers around specific legal interventions for displaced persons will occur this month. Several ELAP attorneys will serve as presenters. The immediate legal needs for displaced persons may involve issues of Kinship Care, Probate, Guardianship, Public Benefits, Homeowner's Claims/Insurance, Landlord/Tenants, Crisis Consumer/Debt-Related Issues, and Health and Mental Health Insurance Issues. Clearly, Older

Americans Act legal assistance providers will encounter increased long-term legal assistance needs for older adults impacted by the hurricanes.

Within our State Unit on Aging, Adult Protective Services staff kept sentinel alert for vulnerable adults in harms' way. They identified issues to safeguard displaced persons and their families, including issues of caregiver burnout. Recently, Louisiana APS requested that Georgia APS and other APS programs identify Louisiana APS clients. Our APS staff will review multiple provider lists in order to provide assistance to their sister APS agency.

Another valuable lesson learned is the significant needs of people who have cognitive impairments. Mental health professionals were available to offer mental health crisis support but the knowledge of someone's dementia or Alzheimer's was unknown. Electronic medical records, access to basic health care information, and integration with physical health needs, would have aided appropriate placements for a special needs shelter. For example, many individuals presented without their prescription medications for chronic or mental disabilities. They could not advise assessment team members of their medications or the proper dose. Electronic medical histories would have assisted these special needs individuals. Older adults face significant challenges in access to adequate mental health services as they are underrepresented and underserved. We were pleased to have the Fuqua Center of Late Life Depression of Emory Healthcare partnered with the Division of Aging Services and the Atlanta Regional Commission Area Agency on Aging during the need for emergency services for older adults.

Another challenge was that rather than receiving evacuees only through the controlled environment of our military base, thousands of evacuees came to Georgia by their own means or the goodwill of others. In Georgia, the American Red Cross opened 22 shelters, while 14 non-American Red Cross shelters were opened across the state. The majority of displaced persons in Georgia are with friends, family or in hotels where the American Red Cross is providing temporary housing for an estimated 57,158 displaced individuals in 18,438 hotel rooms statewide. The long range challenge of providing the

comprehensive and coordinated array of Older Americans Act services to older adults and persons with disabilities is apparent.

Our Department is an exceptional, integral part of Georgia's emergency response before, during and after a crisis. Additionally, the Area Agencies on Aging, their aging network service providers, and advocacy groups enhance the state plans immensely. Communications, coordination and understanding of older adults and people with disabilities are critical to disaster preparedness. Work to modify our existing emergency plans to incorporate lessons learned is currently underway.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with the committee Georgia's experiences in emergency preparedness.