



# COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Subcommittee Chairman  
Doanld M. Payne, Jr. (D-NJ)**

***Protecting Every Citizen: Assessing Emergency Preparedness for Underserved Populations***

**July 23, 2019**

We are here today to discuss how underserved populations are treated in emergencies. I am particularly pleased to be back home for this hearing, and I want to thank Saint Peter's University for hosting us. I appreciate my friend and colleague from New Jersey, Congressman Pascrell, for joining me. I also want to thank our witnesses for being here. Each of you brings a unique and insightful perspective to this topic based on the great work you have been doing.

Unfortunately, FEMA chose not to attend this hearing to hear directly from those who have been working on the ground to make disaster response more equitable. Despite their absence, the information the Subcommittee learns today will assist us as we go back to Washington and continue our legislative and oversight duties. When an emergency or disaster strikes, all Americans are at their most vulnerable. New Jersey is no stranger to the devastation of disasters, with Hurricanes Irene and Sandy both affecting our community in recent years.

Working through a partnership between local, state, and Federal officials, as well as local community groups, everyone does what they can to help their fellow citizens recover. Still, not all citizens have the same needs during or after a disaster, and a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Certain Americans, such as children, low-income individuals, or those with access and functional needs may require special attention in the planning, response, and recovery phases of disasters. For instance, children are more likely to experience mental health distress, including showing signs of PTSD, after a disaster, than adults. Those with access and functional needs may need some type of durable medical equipment in the midst or immediately following a disaster.

Low-income individuals may not have the resources to evacuate before a storm or may not have the resources or knowledge to navigate the confusing maze of Federal disaster assistance programs after a disaster. The response gaps that exist today result in real consequences for those on the ground. George Washington University researchers found that of the 2,975 people who died in Puerto Rico as a result of Hurricane Maria, the clear majority were those living in poverty and seniors—many of whom were likely people with disabilities who faced deadly mobility barriers to safety. After Sandy, children living in homes with minor damage were over four times as likely to be sad or depressed, and over twice as likely to have problems sleeping since the storm, as were children from homes with no damage.

The impact on children after Hurricane Sandy is one of the reasons I have introduced the Homeland Security for Children Act, which would require the Department of Homeland security to incorporate the needs of children into its emergency preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation activities. Unless we do more to address and account for the needs of disproportionately impacted populations in our emergency planning, people will continue to suffer. The witnesses gathered here today will discuss the work they have done to close the response gaps that lead to disparate outcomes. Through the discussion today, I am hopeful we can learn from each other's efforts, and identify ways that coordination with the Federal government can be improved for the next disaster.

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