



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Emergency Preparedness, Response, & Recovery Subcommittee Chairwoman Val Demings (D-FL)

Supporting Underserved Communities in Emergency Management

July 19, 2022

We are here to discuss communities that are most at-risk during disasters and struggle to recover properly from their effects. Disasters impact everyone, but not everyone experiences disasters in the same way. In Florida, we are no stranger to disaster. In recent years, we have weathered Hurricanes Michael and Irma. This year, we've seen floods in the South and tornadoes in the North.

We are now in another hurricane season that has been predicted to be above average, which is why it is so important that we address the needs of our most underserved communities. We know that some individuals are more impacted than others throughout the lifespan of a disaster, from preparation to recovery. Yet all too often vulnerable communities are pushed to the sidelines, ignored, and even discriminated against, during these crises. Communities with disabilities regularly see their civil rights sidelined during emergencies. Too often shelters and emergency communications are inaccessible. Children's unique needs are also often overlooked, leading to insufficient medical care and a lack of services tailored to children.

As a mother and a grandmother, I find it very troubling that children's needs are often not prioritized during disaster. Children hold our future and protecting them, especially when they cannot protect themselves, is critical. I want to take a minute to congratulate my friend, the gentlemen from New Jersey, Mr. Payne on his legislation, the *Homeland Security for Children Act*, which President Joe Biden signed into law last month. This legislation will take important steps to improving the Department of Homeland Security's ability to meet the needs of children.

Age in and of itself does not determine vulnerability to disasters. However, older individuals also suffer disproportionately during disasters. Forty percent of the casualties after Katrina were 71 years old or older. Twenty-one percent of Floridians are 65 and older. We recognize the valuable contributions they make to our community and the need to help them prepare for and recover from disasters. As we have established in previous hearings on equity, low-income and minority communities often struggle to access support from preparedness, recovery, and mitigation funding, hurting their ability to cope with disasters.

I am proud to have partnered with Chairman Thompson on the *FEMA Equity Act* to address these flaws in our Federal emergency management system. This legislation is incredibly important because it reinforces the concept that all Americans deserve to be supported during crises—regardless, of where they come from, their age, ability, race, or ethnicity. Sadly, we know that all too often money is a barrier to individuals and families preparing for and withstanding a disaster. Access to resources such as a car to evacuate or the internet to get proper alerts can all be key factors in surviving a storm.

Growing up, I was the youngest of seven, the daughter of a maid and a janitor. We grew up poor. We experienced hard times, just like many working-class families in Florida are facing trying times now.

In times like these, we, as a nation, have a responsibility to ensure that everyone can weather storms, and that no one is left behind, regardless of where they live, abilities, or whether they are rich or poor or are younger or older.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has begun to expand support for underserved communities, including making equity a core tenant of its strategic plan. FEMA's work on equity includes taking social vulnerability into account when investing in mitigation projects to ensure that we are prepared to withstand shocks and recover more easily. This is a good start, but there is still more that must be done.

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