

FEMA Remarks to Elder Justice Coordinating Council

Aaron Levy, Director, FEMA Individual and Community Preparedness Division:

My name is Aaron Levy, and I am the Division Director of FEMA's Individual and Community Preparedness Division.

I am honored to speak on this panel about preparedness and older adults. As time goes on, we anticipate more extreme and severe weather events that threaten our ability to survive and thrive, which is especially true for underserved communities such as older adults.

As governments at all levels work to adjust and become more adaptable to these changes, innovative partnerships such as this one, will expand the reach and effectiveness of our work to ready the nation. We cannot do our work without the support of interagency partners.

As such, we look forward to a long and productive partnership between FEMA and the Elder Justice Coordinating Council (EJCC).

Now, to get more specific. My Division develops premier emergency preparedness resources for individuals, families, and communities across the nation. We use science-based research to inform educational products for our preparedness programs.

Individuals, families, and communities can trust they have the latest and most accurate information to be resilient against disasters.

With that said, I want to highlight a few specific preparedness products my team developed:

Our [*Guide for Alerts and Warnings*](#) helps you and your family understand hazard alerts and the actions to take if you receive one in your area.

[*Are You Ready?*](#) offers comprehensive information and recommendations on preparing for different types of disasters. This document provides general disaster preparedness tips for before, during, and after disasters, as well as best practices to inform your preparedness decisions about specific disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and active shooters.

[*Ready 2 Help*](#) is an interactive card game for kids ages 8–12 that explores five simple steps they can take to stay safe and make a difference until help arrives. This is the perfect activity for a



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grandparent or loved one to play with a child in their life, or as we have learned, for caregivers to use with older adults suffering from cognitive decline to help empower them to stay safe during an emergency.

The [Emergency Financial First Aid Kit \(EFFAK\)](#) helps you organize important financial, medical, and household information. It includes a checklist of important documents and forms to compile your relevant information.

I will now pass the mic over to my esteemed colleague, Mr. Justin Knighten, Director of FEMA's Office of External Affairs who will be talking about the challenges and barriers to access for older adults.

Without further ado...Mr. Knighten.

Justin Knighten, Director, FEMA Office of External Affairs:

Good morning. It is a pleasure to address the members of the Elder Justice Coordinating Council as we prepare to launch an extensive campaign at FEMA to prepare older adults for worsening disasters.

First, let me thank you for being advocates for this important segment of our population. EJCC is an important voice in the conversation. You are a conduit for resources. You are an ally in our efforts to bring equity and justice into disaster response and recovery efforts for our older adult communities.

As we get ready for a long, hot summer across much of this nation, and prepare for a new hurricane season, we are hoping to enlist you in a new and critical mobilization to improve outcomes from more frequent and worsening disasters that disproportionately affect older adults.

To begin this important discussion on preparedness for older adults, I would like to share a brief, two-minute video from our Ready Campaign titled: "[We Prepare Every Day.](#)" **[Play Video]**

For us at FEMA, it has never been more important to craft and deliver intentional and culturally competent communications and messaging. Our messaging must meet people where they are, be relatable, in plain language, and be driven by an imperative towards *action*.

Related to that, I would like to spend the heart of my remarks centered on the barriers older adults face in preparedness, what we can do to overcome these barriers, and how we can leverage partnerships to support older adults in our communities.

The statistics around older adult survival rates are alarming and troubling. When Hurricane Ian hit the southwest coast of Florida last September, it brought with it 150-mile-an-hour winds and 12-foot storm surges. Sadly, of the 120 people who died in the storm, two-thirds of them were 60 or older. Many were found drowned in their homes. Hurricanes and other disasters take a heavy toll on our older adult communities.

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During Hurricane Katrina in 2005, 3 out of 4 deaths were from individuals 60 or older. During Hurricane Florence in 2018, 2 out of 3 North Carolinians that died were older adults.

We know that older adults, those with chronic health conditions or disabilities, those that live in rural areas without connectivity and resources, and those in low-income areas, are most vulnerable in disasters. In 2017, 433 residents in Florida nursing homes died within 90 days of Hurricane Irma's arrival. Most of the victims of the 2018 Camp Fire in California were older adults. The atmospheric rivers in California stranded many older adults and left officials scrambling to move to higher ground.

Our challenge is urgent as we face impending extreme heat events across our nation. Hurricane Ida in 2021 knocked out power over several states, leaving residents in apartments and senior living centers sweltering in high temperatures. This led to a disproportionately high death rate among older adults. The 2021 Heat Dome in the Pacific Northwest resulted in 250 deaths, with most of them being from older adult communities. In Chicago, extreme heat disrupted power and stalled food deliveries in low-income neighborhoods. It is urgent that we work with our partners to get our messages and our strategies aligned.

The figures point to a growing problem government and partners must address together. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights warns that older adults and people with disabilities are the most adversely affected in emergencies yet are the least likely to have access to emergency support.

There are many barriers to older adult preparedness. Many have limited mobility and do not have transportation. Others have chronic health conditions that are exacerbated when regular healthcare is disrupted because of weather events. Some have medical equipment that is not easily transported during an evacuation. Many older adults fear leaving their homes, don't want to strand a pet, and find shelters intimidating even if they could save their lives. In rural communities, technology that enables emergency alerts is often not available. Finally, language barriers and social isolation contribute to worse outcomes for older adults.

It is imperative that we, as government, understand we cannot do this alone. Getting older adult populations ready, as climate change worsens our disaster landscape, is a job for us and our partners from all sectors. The EJCC has been a valuable contributor, and for that, I thank you.

Going forward, we need to build new partnerships that leverage families, friends, caregivers, and nonprofits at the state, local, tribal, and territorial levels. We may need to enlist partners we have not thought of as allies in this effort. As we assess the unique needs of older adult communities, we need to reach out and mobilize those who can help us by promoting cultural competence, building support networks, and normalizing neighbors helping neighbors to enhance preparedness and change these bleak survivor numbers.

FEMA is forging a new partnership with the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers. This is a new relationship for our agency and represents the types of partnerships that will be critical to our success in

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preparing older adults. Caregivers are a link to the older adult communities. We know that some caregivers are those hired to take care of someone who needs specialized help. Many times, though, they are husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, children, or other family members. We are committed to giving caregivers the tools they need to get themselves, and those they take care of, prepared.

At FEMA, we believe tailored and culturally competent messaging will advance actions and best practices in targeted communities. That is why we have specifically focused on select populations in the last three years of our Ready campaigns. As the summer progresses, we will be using our messaging to emphasize the dangers of extreme heat under the hashtag #SummerReady. In 2021, we addressed Latino/Hispanic preparedness. Last year we developed targeted messaging to support Black and African American preparedness. This September, our ads and billboards will focus on the preparedness of older adults.

I urge you to use our Ready resources to develop your own messaging to amplify our goal of building resilience in older adult communities. I hope you will help us ensure our messages are seen and heard by all communities—especially by older adults who are isolated, those with disabilities, those living in rural communities, and those from low-income backgrounds.

It is incumbent upon us to be force multipliers in advancing this important part of social justice—the well-being of our older adults who have given us so much.

This is my urgent call to action to everyone in this room is: Help us deliver life-changing and life-sustaining strategies to these communities based on their own unique needs and vulnerabilities. Connect us to the partners who work in this space and can be influential in crafting solutions. Model the neighbor-helping-neighbor approach on a grander scale.

Standing together, we can improve the numbers, we can build strength, we can foster resilience, and we can infuse equity into all phases of disaster response and recovery. What we do together today will save lives tomorrow for those who have given us their wisdom and are an important part of the fabric of our nation.