

Kohl, Dingell Release Results of GAO Report on Emergency Evacuation Plans for the Most Vulnerable

U.S. Senator Herb Kohl (D-WI), Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, and U.S. Congressman John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, today released a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)...

NEWS RELEASE

Committee on Energy and Commerce

Rep. John D. Dingell, Chairman

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Kohl, Dingell Release Results of GAO Report on Emergency Evacuation Plans for the Most Vulnerable Report Measures Progress of Federal Agencies in Implementing Previous Recommendations

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senator Herb Kohl (D-WI), Chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, and U.S. Congressman John D. Dingell (D-MI), Chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, today released a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) on the status of the federal government's level of preparedness to evacuate vulnerable populations in the event of an emergency. The report examined the progress federal agencies have made in implementing previous GAO recommendations to improve the evacuation of transportation-disadvantaged populations, including patients and residents of healthcare facilities during an emergency.

“This GAO report is invaluable, as it has been difficult to obtain definitive answers from DHS and other agencies as to the progress they've made to make sure our most venerable citizens will be taken care of in an

emergency," said Senator Kohl. "We intend to keep close tabs on the federal agencies to ensure that our national emergency plans leave no one behind."

"I remain concerned that federal emergency officials have done too little to ensure that vulnerable populations, such as nursing home residents, are not abandoned during emergency evacuations," said Rep. Dingell. "It has been almost three years since we witnessed how shamefully unprepared federal officials were after Hurricane Katrina. Many of the people who died as a result were seniors, disabled, children, and others trapped without cars. GAO's review makes clear that DHS has made little progress in helping state and local first responders prepare for another national disaster — these emergency workers continue to be largely on their own."

In a July 2006 report, GAO recommended that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) plan for the evacuation of hospital patients and nursing home residents during an emergency. In a subsequent December 2006 report, GAO made recommendations to the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve the preparedness of state and local governments in evacuating transportation-disadvantaged populations. In the report released today, GAO reviews and rates each of the agencies to determine whether the recommendations have been implemented. The report confirms that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), within DHS, is the sole lead agency in providing evacuation support if federal assistance is required, after some related duties were transferred to the agency from DOT earlier this year.

Of note, DHS has not implemented the recommendation to require state and local grant recipients to plan, train, or conduct exercises on the evacuations of transportation-disadvantaged populations. In last year's 9/11 Commission bill, Senator Kohl successfully included a provision to ensure that public transportation workers are trained to meet the evacuation needs of transportation-disadvantaged seniors in the event of an emergency.

Additionally, HHS has only partially implemented GAO's recommendation to determine a concrete plan to meet the needs of nursing home residents during a crisis. Specifically, the department has not addressed the federal government's role in the evacuation of nursing homes in its hurricane "playbook," and has not yet provided evidence that the role of the National Disaster Medical System has been clarified in the event of an evacuation.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Kohl held a hearing in May 2006 to address the needs of seniors in the case of a national emergency. At the hearing, Kohl called on DHS to implement specific plans and programs for all seniors facing emergency situations, stating: "We need the commitment and energy of a DHS determined, as this Committee is, never again to desert our seniors when they need us most."

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Prepared by the Committee on Energy and Commerce

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