

CRS Report for Congress

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Older Americans Act: Disaster Assistance for Older Persons After Hurricane Katrina

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Summary

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina is having significant negative effects on older persons with physical and mental disabilities. Persons who are socially isolated and dependent upon informal caregivers and social service programs to assist them live independently have immediate and long-term needs. The Administration on Aging (AoA) has allocated \$750,000 in disaster relief funds available through the Older Americans Act to Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi (divided equally among the three states). Congress may consider whether additional actions are necessary to assist state and area agencies on aging in their efforts to assist the frail elderly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Elderly

The devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina is having significant negative effects on older persons with physical and mental disabilities, especially those who are socially isolated and dependent upon social service programs. Moreover, many older persons rely on informal support from families and friends to help them live independently in their own homes. Many of these informal caregivers may themselves be struggling to locate shelter and basic necessities, compromising their ability to sustain caregiving activities.¹ In addition, disaster-related environmental factors, such as dehydration and exposure to infectious diseases, seriously affect frail older persons with chronic conditions.

Elderly Population in Affected States

Older persons in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi have higher rates of poverty and are more likely to have a disability than older persons in the United States as

¹ A recent survey of 680 Houston-based Katrina evacuees found that of those who did not evacuate before the storm, 38% were either physically unable to leave or had to care for someone who was physically unable to leave. Washington Post, Kaiser Family Foundation, Harvard School of Public Health, *Survey of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees* [<http://www.kff>]

whole (**Table 1**). The compound effects of disability and poverty present tremendous challenges in caring for persons with disabilities in emergency situations.

Table 1. Selected Characteristics of Persons Age 65 and Older in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi

Persons age 65 and older	Alabama	Louisiana	Mississippi	United States
Number/percent of population	562,189 (12.7%)	494,278 (11.3%)	329,504 (11.7%)	34.2 million (12%)
Percent with income below poverty	11.9%	14.7%	15.2%	9.4%
Percent with a disability*	46.0%	46.3%	52.1%	39.6%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey.

*Disability is defined as a long-lasting sensory, physical, mental or emotional condition making it difficult to do activities such as walking, dressing, bathing, or remembering; or impeding a person from going outside the home alone.

Administration on Aging Disaster Assistance Program

In the event of a federally declared disaster, the Older Americans Act requires the Administration on Aging (AoA) to allocate funds to state agencies on aging to provide social services and related supplies for older persons in affected states. Funding is allocated from Title III of the Act (Grants for State and Community Programs on Aging); the amount available may not exceed 2% of funds appropriated under Title IV of the Act (Training, Research, and Discretionary Projects and Programs). State agencies on aging pass funds through to area agencies on aging designated pursuant to the Older Americans Act. These funds are in addition to any funds that may be available to support older persons through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

In response to Hurricane Katrina, AoA has made \$750,000 in Older Americans Act funds available to Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi (divided equally among the three states). Older Americans Act disaster assistance funds are to be used for services that other public and private agencies are unable to fill and that are authorized by various programs under the Act. These services include meals for older persons as well as a wide variety of social services, such as transportation, information and assistance, case management, counseling, legal services, among others.

Issues for Congress

Among the many issues associated with the aftermath of Katrina, Congress may opt to assess how the federal emergency response is affecting services and programs for older persons, especially those whose economic resources are limited and whose support system is fragile. Issues that will be of concern include provision of: meals to older persons with special dietary needs; special needs shelters to accommodate persons with chronic medical conditions; personal care aides for those with chronic disabilities and who lack informal family caregivers; transportation services; case management staff to

assess needs of older persons and make arrangements for appropriate care; and emergency medications.

Additional Information

For additional information, see:

Administration on Aging [<http://www.aoa.gov>]

National Council on Disability [<http://www.ncd.gov>]

AARP [<http://www.aarp.org/katrina>].