

Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl  
May 25, 2006  
Special Committee on Aging Hearing  
Preparing for Pandemic Flu

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing. For too long, the federal government ignored warnings that we are dangerously unprepared for a pandemic flu outbreak. Experts no longer ask if such a pandemic could occur; rather, they question when it will occur.

Earlier this month, the White House unveiled its plan for responding to a flu pandemic. This plan, while a constructive first step, leaves many serious questions unanswered -- like which federal agency and officials will take the lead in responding to an outbreak emergency.

I'm also concerned that we are not prepared to care for the complex needs of our nation's seniors. The elderly are among our most vulnerable members of society and are far too often overlooked -- or even ignored -- in emergency preparedness plans.

Hurricane Katrina tragically illustrated how we fail the seniors who need us most. Last week, I chaired a hearing in this committee where we heard that 71 percent of those who died during Katrina were over the age of 60. We must learn the awful lesson of those deaths and make sure any strategy to prepare for pandemic flu incorporates the unique needs of seniors.

We must do a better job in telling older people what supplies and plans they need to have in place in the event of a national emergency like pandemic flu. As a start, my office has developed a "tip sheet", and HHS and DHS should follow with pamphlets, public announcements, and specific direction for seniors and the agencies that serve them. We also must direct states and local governments to include seniors in all planning, training of first responders, and practice exercises for national emergencies. And communities need plans to locate and help seniors who live at home if a flu pandemic occurs.

The federal, state, and local governments are making progress in preparing for a potential outbreak, but we must do more. Even if we are spared from a flu pandemic, the work we do today will serve us all well in the event of any national emergency.

I look forward to hearing from our panel today about the direction our nation should and will take to deal with pandemic flu, including the steps we must take to care for our seniors. Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing.