



**U.S. SENATE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING**

**“Disaster Preparedness and Response: The Special Needs of Older Americans”**

**September 20, 2017**

**Statement of James R. Balda  
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**U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging**

**“Disaster Preparedness and Response: The Special Needs of Older Americans”**

**Wednesday, September 20, 2017, 9 AM**

**562 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.**

On behalf of Argentum, which advocates for excellence in senior living, we thank you for holding a hearing on the important topic of the special needs of older Americans when it comes to disaster preparedness and response. This population is one of the nation’s most valuable resources, but also one of the most vulnerable.

Argentum is the leading national association exclusively dedicated to supporting companies operating professionally managed, resident-centered senior living communities and the older adults and families they serve. Argentum member companies operate senior living communities offering assisted living, independent living, continuing care, and memory care services to older adults and their families. Since 1990, Argentum has advocated for choice, independence, dignity, and quality of life for all seniors.

Argentum has worked with the senior living industry in all states to advance industry standards and regulations to ensure that all senior living communities continue to provide high quality care and quality of life as well as appropriate supports and services to the diverse array of residents served, including effectively preparing for the inevitability of natural disasters.

Caring for a population that includes frail seniors in the face of a natural disaster offers many challenges, such as safe transportation; providing appropriate health services and nutrition; meeting the needs of people with special conditions such as dementia, limited ambulation, and vision or hearing impairments; ensuring there is access to medical records and life-saving medicines; emotional issues such as separation from loved ones and caregivers; vulnerabilities to those who prey on older adults through elder abuse; and other risks related to evacuation.

As you know, the senior living industry is regulated in every state and must follow the relevant state laws, regulations, and codes to ensure the safety of community residents. States that are the most successful in integrating the needs of seniors in their emergency preparedness plans are those that offer clear, collaborative efforts between their emergency management and health agencies, and long term care providers. Advanced planning, prevention, communication, and state and local partnerships are critical in helping to ensure the safety and well-being of older adults, especially those who are vulnerable in a disaster or emergency. Assisted living communities in each state are required to have an emergency management plan in place to rely on during a dynamic environment such as a natural disaster.

We were heartened to hear that the nearly 190,000 residents and patients served in long term care communities in Florida remained safe thanks to the smart planning of long term care employees in preparing communities to cope with an emergency situation such as a natural disaster.

For example, Legend Senior Living based in Wichita, Kansas, owns and operates eight Florida-based senior living and memory care communities, which house more than 640 residents and employ more than 540 people across the state. A 24-hour command center was immediately organized at the home office in Wichita. Generators were tested and prepared for use. Nursing staff ensured that sufficient medication was in stock. Residence directors communicated with neighboring fire departments and hospitals to discuss possible emergency situations. The home office had calls with each community every four hours to ensure they were equipped and safe. When electricity went out, the phone system rolled to Wichita. The Florida communities worked hard to alleviate resident unease and were fortunate to have a chef who could continue to prepare meals and popcorn for residents to enjoy while watching football on television.

Other providers that needed to evacuate residents sent them to sister communities nearby or in some cases companies rented out entire hotels to move in residents, staff, and their families. The widespread nature of these two disasters brought out the best in senior living providers. In Texas, memory care specialist Silverado took in 30 patients from a hospital that needed to evacuate. Providers opened their doors to residents from nearby cities and towns who arrived wet and cold and were given warm clothes, food, and a place to stay.

Every emergency situation is different. At some point, a decision must be made on whether to shelter in place or evacuate. It's not an exact science and as was demonstrated in Florida, hurricane paths can swiftly change. In Texas, the Dickinson-based community that received negative national attention was told to shelter in place by the city's mayor. At some point, that decision did need to be reversed when the rising waters filled the community. Thankfully, everyone was safely evacuated.

Professionally managed senior living communities are structured to cope with the distinct needs that older adults pose in the face of natural disaster. Each stage of an emergency, whether sheltering in place or evacuation, must be treated differently when dealing with frailer adults than other populations. Community staff understand the custom care plans that an older adult may not be able to experience from a shelter or relief organization unfamiliar with a frail individual.

Some valuable lessons were learned from Hurricane Katrina resulting in much better care in a natural disaster emergency. During the recent hurricanes in Florida and Texas, wrist bands with names and community were immediately placed on resident wrists along with medication identification. Families were notified where their loved ones would be taken in case of evacuation.

We have all learned from past tragedies, and Argentum currently is in discussions with Florida and Texas officials about regulations that have proved effective. For example, Texas in 2011 passed a law prioritizing assisted living communities for restoration of electricity following an extended power outage. Assisted living is not on such a priority list in Florida. We must have

thoughtful discussion about the role for generators, adequate fuel supply, and safety considerations such as significant fuel storage on the site of a caregiving community. Several of our member companies were unable to access fuel to power their community generators and buses post-Hurricane Irma and searched for gas as far away as Maryland and Tennessee.

We also hope this situation spurs a discussion about a need to consider in the future possible alternative energy sources and technology uses that could help long term care organizations navigate this issue successfully.

Natural disasters are inevitable and can occur anywhere, at any time, in the United States. Argentum and its members have worked hard to elevate the importance of disaster preparedness. We take it very seriously. The lives of each and every resident is precious and let's not forget the caregivers who were the real heroes during these storms. They spent night after night in the senior living communities caring for residents and many were not able to be with their own families during this time. While the safety of the senior living residents took priority, many caregivers finally went home to realize they had lost everything. Many companies in Texas and Florida have been fundraising with company matching programs to help these employees get back on their feet. Argentum has pledged to match up to \$50,000 in donations from the senior living industry to communities and employees negatively affected by Hurricane Harvey. **Please see an addendum beginning on p. 5**, which highlights just a few of the many stories we received of compassionate care, heroism, and acts of kindness from residents, families members of residents, and staff members from communities across the states affected by the hurricanes.

We look forward to continuing our dialogue with you to ensure that all of our nation's seniors are housed safely at all times in a caring, nurturing environment. Argentum is available to further address any of these issues by contacting Argentum President & CEO James Balda at [jbalda@argentum.org](mailto:jbalda@argentum.org) or COO Maribeth Bersani at [mbersani@argentum.org](mailto:mbersani@argentum.org).

We sincerely appreciate your consideration of these comments.

## ADDENDUM

### Preparing and Caring in the Face of a Natural Disaster

*Senior Living Prioritizes Resident Safety and Comfort*

#### **CARING FOR RESIDENTS, STAFF, AND COMMUNITY**

Below are a sampling of the many letters of appreciation and support that have poured in from family members following the recent hurricanes in Texas and Florida:

**Family member of Belmont Village resident (Texas):** *“First I want to say I felt that you all handled the lockdown for the residents of Belmont Village Hunters Creek during Hurricane Harvey really well. I appreciate the email updates and the 800 call-in number to stay up to date of daily on goings. I had complete peace of mind that my parents were well-cared for, busy, and kept in their normal routine during that stressful time. Also I don’t think they had much understanding of what was going on outside the walls of the building, all over the city of Houston. So they were not frightened, for which I was very thankful. A heartfelt thank you goes out to you all.”*



*After Hurricane Harvey, Atria Senior Living held a Texas-Sized Feast at the Support Center – as did many of its communities across the country – to raise funds for Atria Cares and affected employees. So far, more than \$200,000 has been raised.*

**Family member of Atria Evergreen Woods residents (Florida):** *“The most precious people in my life are those that raised me as a child. With many others in Florida and as Atria Evergreen Woods residents, they were confronted with the path of hurricane Irma in September 2017. While many citizens of Florida were struggling with the idea of evacuations, Atria had everything planned and under control. You moved your Atria residents to a location in Orlando. The fact that Atria had a preplan and a hurricane safe location ready was extremely re-assuring for me and my family. The larger success story comes with the level of service, support and care that the Atria employees gave to its residents in the Orlando location during and after the hurricane. My aunt and uncle raised me from very young and they mean everything to me. Living in New York, you can imagine how difficult it was for me to deal with the situation. The feedback I would like to give you, which I hope is cascaded to the service providers is that (they) were given first class attention and service during this natural disaster.”*

**Medication Tech, Autumn Leaves of Estero (Florida):** *“It was the most humbling experience I have ever had. This storm made me appreciate a lot of things and look at life differently. Autumn Leaves opened their doors to my family in order to keep them safe and us together. They opened their doors to help others affected by the pending storm. They kept all of us safe and*

*free from harm. I would not change anything and would do it all over again to care for our residents and families!”*

**Retirement Center Management (Texas):** *On Sunday, August 27 around 3 p.m., the community received a call from the nephew of Chris & Johnny; brothers who live across the street from a Retirement Center Management community. One is diabetic and the other is an amputee with a prosthetic leg. A person kayaking down the street was asked by the community staff to assist Chris across the street. The staff was concerned about him walking in the water since he had some open sores and is diabetic. The community nurses did an assessment when the brothers arrived at the building and were able to provide them shelter from the storm with a warm location, dry clothes, and food and water. The community served as an emergency storm shelter for more than 10 people during the severe flooding.*



*Retirement Management Center was able to give shelter to two senior brothers, who were neighbors from across the street.*

**The Fountains at Boca Ciega Bay in St. Petersburg (Florida):** *“Located right on the Bay, this community was ordered to evacuate two days before Irma hit. The task was nothing short of monumental, but every Watermark community has a custom, detailed Emergency Preparedness Plan and the Fountains at Boca Ciega Bay followed each step for a successful evacuation and return. Details range from “unplug computers and appliances” to “arrange for pharmacy and follow all medical charts” and “coordinate buses with chair lifts and bathrooms” plus everything in between. Residents of our independent neighborhood evacuated to the Mission Inn, a resort hotel an hour or two from the community. Temporary housing in a big ballroom provided a safe experience and the hotel staff worked tirelessly alongside our associates to ensure a positive experience. Residents played games and cards thanks to quick thinking community life associates who grabbed them all on the way out the community. Exercise programs, club meetings and classes were held with enthusiasm to keep the days fun and to offer residents a routine as close to our typical lifestyle as possible. One resident brought her harmonica and entertained folks during and after the storm, with sing-a-longs of everyone’s favorites.”*

**Resident at Five Star Senior Living, Horizon:** *“The staff was absolutely wonderful during this hurricane. Many stayed here to assist and the attitude was one of what can we do to help, friendly, smiling, eager to please which combined with older people already upset and sometimes confused, was a real positive attribute in these circumstances. The nurse remained on duty the entire time checking in on every resident who might have needed her aid. Our Director was here full time during the hurricane, as were several of the sales staff and servers.”*

**Resident at Brookdale First Colony (Texas):** *“During the weeks and days that Harvey waged his “war” on our state, I was moved by the care and love which emanated from Brookdale First Colony staff who remained with us during the deluge. They calmed our nerves, welcomed our*

*displaced relatives with open arms and were deeply concerned for all. They say heroes are made in times of war. These associates were our heroes and deserve Medals of Honor.”*

### **UNITING AND REBUILDING**

Many senior living companies quickly rallied resources to ensure staff and communities negatively affected by these natural disasters were taken care of. Here is a sampling of their efforts:

**Watercrest Senior Living Group** of Vero Beach, Florida is spearheading a \$100,000 fundraising initiative coined ‘Watercrest CARES’ in support of Samaritan’s Purse for Hurricane Harvey disaster relief. Samaritan’s Purse is a Christian organization led by Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, serving victims of disaster worldwide. Watercrest principals, Marc Vorkapich, CEO and Joan Williams, CFO, launched the ‘Watercrest CARES’ fundraising campaign with a starting donation of \$10,000, encouraging others to contribute to the campaign’s relief efforts.

**Sunrise Senior Living** community The Fairfax held a “fill the truck” fundraiser on 9/21 to benefit those affected by Harvey and Irma. The Army Retirement Foundation-Potomac a 501c3 charitable organization that founded The Fairfax Military Retirement Community near Fort Belvoir, VA, also managed by Sunrise Senior Living. Co-Hosted along with TAD Relocation (TAD relocation assists in planning and downsizing of residents moving into The Fairfax and other senior living communities), a Fill a Truck event was held today to collect items by those affected by Hurricane Harvey. They filled the entire truck (a 26 foot moving truck!) with donations of clothing, bedding, hygiene & personal care products, children’s toys, furniture, food, kitchen items, and pet items.



*Sunrise Senior Living community The Fairfax held a “fill the truck” fundraiser.*

**Legend Senior Living** based in Wichita, Kansas, with communities in Florida, set up a \$20,000 fund for associates impacted by the storm, and other Legend associates gave another \$5,000 to it. It is helping associates who have flooded homes, cars, and the many who lost power who had to re-stock the refrigerator. The company housed all our associates 24-7 who worked during the hurricane passing as well as their families. They said they felt safer in the Legend building than at home.

**Belmont Village** financial contributions to the company’s relief fund, BVCares, now total \$106,000 including the company match, creating a source of critical support funds to help Belmont’s staff recover from damage to home and property.

**Atria Senior Living** raised over \$200,000 for their Atria Cares, an employee-funded nonprofit organization that provides emergency financial assistance to Atria staff in need.

### **BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The senior living industry has applied its knowledge gained over the decades of caring for older adults, including best practices gleaned from coping with natural disasters. Here are some of the highlights from lessons learned that made senior living able to successfully navigate many of the challenges presented by hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

1. The decision of whether to evacuate or shelter in place is a complicated process that requires a complete and thorough assessment of the situation. Both options have advantages and challenges. But assisted living providers are prepared for both through the development of **emergency disaster management plans**. State rules require communities have food, water, and other necessary supplies for emergency situations that require sheltering in place. Plans also need to specify procedures for evacuations.
2. In addition to well thought out emergency plans, **regularly scheduled drills** involving team members and residents is critical to the successful implementation of the plans.
3. States that are the most successful in integrating the needs of seniors in their emergency preparedness plans are those that offer **clear, collaborative efforts between their emergency management and health agencies**, and long term care providers.
4. **Advance planning, prevention, communication, and state and local** partnerships are critical in helping to ensure the safety and well-being of older adults, especially those who are vulnerable in a disaster or emergency.
5. **Companies with a headquarters outside of the affected zone can take on many of the administrative and coordination responsibilities to free up staff to care for residents.** For example, Legend Senior Living based in Wichita, Kansas, owns and operates eight Florida-based senior living and memory care communities, which house more than 640 residents and employ more than 540 people across the state. A 24-hour command center was immediately organized at the home office in Wichita. The home office had calls with each community every four hours to ensure they were equipped and safe. When electricity went out, the phone system rolled to Wichita.
6. Other providers that needed to evacuate residents sent them to **sister communities nearby or in some cases companies rented out entire hotels** to move in residents, staff, and their families
7. **Providers opened their doors to residents from nearby cities and towns** who arrived wet and cold and were given warm clothes, food, and a place to stay. In Texas, memory care specialist Silverado took in 30 patients from a hospital that needed to evacuate. In at least one example, the assisted living community took in elderly living alone in their own homes who did not have the supplies necessary to survive the hurricane.
8. Many lessons were learned from Katrina. For example, during the recent hurricanes in Florida and Texas, **wrist bands with names and community were immediately placed on resident**



**wrists along with medication identification.** Families were notified **where their loved ones would be taken** in case of evacuation.

9. Autumn Leaves offered **real-time updates on websites** during each of the recent hurricanes for friends and family to get up to the minute information on their affected communities.

- <http://autumnleaves.com/hurricane-harvey-update/> (Harvey)
- <http://autumnleaves.com/hurricane-irma-update/> (Irma)

10. Argentum is establishing an **Emergency Preparedness Standards Board** to develop assessment tools, sample plans and training to senior living providers in the emergency preparedness efforts.