

Testimony of

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Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Graham and members of the Senate Ad-Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery.

I am Mark Shriver, Chairperson of the National Commission on Children and Disasters and Vice President and Managing Director for U.S. Programs at Save the Children.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), the number of annual Presidential declared disasters has increased from an average of 24 per year in the 1980's to 56 per year this decade. With over 40 such disasters already on the books, 2009 is shaping up to push the average even higher¹.

And with the country in the midst of hurricane season and simultaneously planning for a H1N1 flu outbreak that will most likely disproportionately affect children², today's hearing is certainly as timely, as it is important.

Children represent nearly 25% of the American population; 73 million are 18 years of age or under³.

Yet when it comes to disaster planning and disaster management, at all levels of government, the unique needs of children are typically misunderstood and unaddressed.

As an example, state and local emergency managers are required by federal law to meet the needs of pets⁴.

But children are not considered such a distinct priority.

Instead, children are lumped together with several other "at risk" "vulnerable" or "special needs" populations, such as the elderly, the disabled and people with limited English proficiency. As a consequence, there is slight consideration given to children when disaster plans are written and exercised, when equipment and medicines are purchased, when disaster response and recovery efforts are activated.

¹ http://www.fema.gov/news/disaster_totals_annual.fema

² According to the CDC daily briefing for May 7, 2009, of the 1,639 confirmed cases of the H1N1 virus in the United States at that time, more than half (58%) were under 18 years of age. <http://www.cdc.gov/media/transcripts/2009/t090507.htm>

³ US Census Bureau, Population Estimates, July 1, 2008; <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2008/NC-EST2008-02.xls>

⁴ Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act of 2006; Public Law 109-308, 109th Congress; <http://www.thomas.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c109:5:./temp/~c109hZENsp::>

The consideration of children as either “little adults” or at risk, vulnerable or with special needs, has created what former FEMA Administrator R. David Paulison termed “benign neglect” of children affected by disasters.

Congress created the National Commission on Children and Disasters as an independent, bi-partisan body to examine the gaps and shortcomings in public policy that perpetuate this cycle of benign neglect and then make policy recommendations to the President and Congress.

The Commission held its first public meeting October 14, 2008. We meet publicly each quarter in Washington, D.C. We post our work on our website www.childrenanddisasters.acf.hhs.gov

For the past nine months have engaged the prior and current Administrations with a simple objective: to push children to the forefront of their thoughts and integrate them into their actions.

But our focus is not exclusively on the federal government.

We are engaging a larger community of key stakeholders to encourage a national discussion on children and disasters. Our partners have included: the American Red Cross, American Academy of Pediatrics, National Emergency Managers Association, International Association of Emergency Managers, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Association of Counties and the National Coalition on Children and Disasters, consisting of twenty national advocacy organizations, led by Habitat for Humanity.

This past January, we conducted a field hearing in Baton Rouge to learn first hand the frustrations and hardships of children still struggling to recover from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. We continue to work closely with dedicated organizations like Catholic Charities and the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps.

Our interim report is due to President Obama and Congress in October 2009, followed by the final report in October 2010.

Congress requires the Commission to examine a broad set of policy areas, including health, mental health, child care, child welfare, education, transportation, evacuation, housing, juvenile justice and emergency management.

For the purposes of today’s hearing, I will focus my testimony on the Commission’s findings and preliminary recommendations on child care.

Why is child care important in disaster recovery?

1. Child care programs must be prepared for disasters, not only to ensure children’s safety and mental well-being, but also to facilitate recovery by providing support to parents, employees and employers;

2. Child care expedites recovery by ensuring children are safe while parents visit damaged property, access public benefits, search for employment and housing, and make other efforts to rebuild their lives;
3. Loss or interruption of child care services following a disaster has an adverse economic impact on parents, providers, employers and communities;
4. Parents who generally do not need child care may need it in the aftermath of a disaster.

Last month, Save the Children released a report “the Disaster Decade” which contained a report card on child care disaster planning requirements across fifty states and the District of Columbia. Among the key findings:

- Only seven states have laws or regulations requiring licensed child care providers to have basic written emergency plans in place addressing evacuation, reunification, and accommodating children with special needs;
- Only twenty-one states require licensed child-care facilities to have a designated site and evacuation route in the event of a disaster; and
- Only fifteen states require licensed child care facilities to have a reunification plan for children and families in the event they become separated during an emergency.

Here are a few steps Congress can take to address these findings and prioritize child care in disaster preparedness, response and recovery:

1. Include the provision of child care as a human service activity within the National Response Framework and in the development of a National Disaster Recovery Strategy;
2. Incorporate child care as an “essential service” under the Stafford Act. Such action will provide a clear avenue to ensure funding and support for the establishment of temporary emergency child care and recovery of child care infrastructure;
3. Incorporate child care services as an emergency protective measure under Category B of the Public Assistance Program, which allows States and other eligible governments to be reimbursed for child care services;
4. Encourage states to require child care providers to have comprehensive all-hazards plans that, at a minimum, incorporate specific capabilities such as shelter-in-place, evacuation, relocation, family reunification, staff training, continuity of services, and accommodation of children with special needs;
5. Include a requirement in the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant that state child care plans include guidelines for recovery and temporary emergency child care operating standards after a disaster;

6. Create an emergency contingency fund to help state and local governments meet additional needs resulting from an influx of evacuated families from other states; and
7. Require child care provider disaster plans to be coordinated with state and local disaster operations plans.

The Commission is working cooperatively with FEMA, the Department of Health and Human Services, and relevant non-governmental stakeholders to develop and implement these policies, the extent practicable under current law, to provide immediate disaster assistance to states, child care providers and families in need of child care.

In conclusion, we must elevate children within the consciousness of policy-makers here in Washington, D.C. and across the country.

The Commission strongly believes that the best way to instill public confidence in the way our nation prepares for, responds to, and recovers from disasters, is to make sure the needs of children are a priority.

Children sit at the center of family and community. The H1N1 flu outbreak quickly proved this point as school and day care closings caused immediate health concerns, logistical obstacles for working parents and economic consequences for families, small businesses and communities.

To paraphrase FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate, there is no stronger indicator of hope and optimism to a disaster-affected community than to see a yellow school bus making its way down a neighborhood lane.

In the aftermath of a disaster, effectively providing for the safety and welfare of children will create greater stability and help families and communities recover faster.

Again, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the National Commission on Children and Disasters. We look forward to providing updates on the important work of the Commission to you in the future.

I would be pleased to answer your questions.