

Focusing on Children in Disasters: Evacuation Planning and Mental Health Recovery

Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

Tuesday, August 4, 2009

10:00 AM

Dirksen Senate Office Building, room 342

Opening Statement

Senator Robert F. Bennett

Thank you all for coming to brief our panel. I am especially pleased that the distinguished group before us has such a depth of knowledge and experience dealing with disasters and specifically looking at the effects they have on one of the most vulnerable segments of the population: our children. As a new member of this Committee I welcome the chance to work on these important issues.

In my home state of Utah we have seen severe weather storms, tornadoes, forest fires and floods in recent decades. The Wasatch mountain range, which looks over 80% of Utah's population, sits on an active fault line, experiences small earthquakes frequently and is estimated to be overdue for an earthquake above the 7.5 magnitude level on the Richter scale. As a Utahn, I am aware that the occurrence of a major earthquake is not a question of if, but when. And like every Senator, I am keenly aware of the unique challenges each of our states face in responding to such disasters.

There are particular aspects of Utah's population which are directly relevant to today's hearing. Utah has the most children per family of any other state in the union by a large margin (2.2 children per family), when compared with the national average of 1.86 children per family. Utah has the highest percentage of its total population under age 5 of any state at 10 percent. Utah has the lowest median age in the nation, at 28.7. And finally, Utah is the fastest growing state, with 2.7 percent growth between July 2007 and July 2008. All of these statistics point to the fact that Utah has a proportionally larger part of its population that is especially susceptible to the adverse conditions that follow natural and man-made disasters.

As noted by many experts, including some of the panelists before us today, children are especially susceptible during a disaster. There are many aspects of disaster response which need

further attention and development ranging from increased surge capacities to critical care transportation and long-term mental recovery through consistent case management. I am especially interested in evacuation and emergency planning, immediate post-disaster special needs responses, and medical and mental support services that are geared towards children and vulnerable populations.

Additionally, because we have seen many instances where a major disconnect exists between the state and local responders and the federal government response, I think it is important to work with organizations such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Health and Human Services and the National Guard to increase cooperation and communications before disasters strike. I plan to work closely with the FEMA regional office, the governor's office and the Utah National Guard to take a deeper look at Utah's preparedness for disaster response and what can be done from a federal level to improve it.

I hope to hear from our experts today on these and other important issues and how we can work to improve the situation of children in disaster areas.