

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE

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COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES SENATE

“Focus on Children in Disasters: Evacuation Planning and Mental Health
Recovery”

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Introduction

Good morning Chairman Landrieu, Ranking Member Graham and other distinguished members of the Subcommittee. It is a privilege to appear before you today on behalf of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security, and I appreciate your interest in and continued support of the emergency management community. I appreciate that you have invited me to testify in this hearing, as I firmly believe that we, as a Nation, must do more to effectively meet the critical needs of all special needs populations, including children, who are affected by disasters.

Historically, the U.S. has approached disaster planning by focusing heavily on the needs of what many refer to as the general population, and has not devoted sufficient advance attention to those who may have special needs and thus require specific and immediate attention in a crisis. As a result, our special needs response actions are too often developed and executed on the fly, unnecessarily creating the potential for confusion and, in the worst cases, failure to meet the needs of children and other vulnerable members of the population.

Madam Chairwoman, FEMA is working hard to change this reactive approach. It is time for special needs populations, be they children or any other segment of our communities who have traditionally been underserved, to be more fully and consistently integrated into preparedness and planning efforts at every level of government. Children are a part of every community. We must understand and address their needs from the outset, recognizing that they are not simply small adults. We must avoid putting planning considerations specific to children in a separate box, and build instead disaster response and recovery plans that account for the fact that children make-up a significant percentage of the population. As FEMA Administrator, one of my top goals is to institutionalize this approach within our Agency, and I am pleased FEMA's dedicated staff has laid a solid planning foundation from which to work.

Even before I arrived in Washington, FEMA was reaching out to states, localities and tribes to ensure that our own basic planning efforts effectively incorporated the needs of children and other special populations. I will not only continue those efforts, but will further build upon and reinforce our national initiatives to improve how we address the critical needs of children in our plans for disaster preparedness, response and recovery.

Past and Ongoing Efforts To Address The Needs Of Children in Disaster Planning

While there is more that we, as a Nation, can do, FEMA has not been idle. We have built a strong network of both public and private organizations that will help unify and strengthen our combined capabilities. For instance, FEMA has worked with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to establish the National Emergency Child Locator Center. This Center, which was required as part of the Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006, helps local and tribal governments and law enforcement agencies track and locate children who have become separated from their parents or guardians as a result of a presidentially declared emergency or major disaster. The Center is operated out of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's facilities, with support from FEMA.

FEMA's grassroots Citizen Corps program has also been involved in improving community preparedness efforts related to children. Working through State and local Citizen Corps Councils, civic and government leaders are coming together to strengthen community preparedness by developing emergency operations plans and outreach strategies that better address the broader range of community needs, including the needs of children in disasters. In addition, FEMA has provided emergency planning assistance to states and communities, including recommendations on how to incorporate the needs of children into their planning efforts.

Training development and delivery for children, other special needs populations and citizen preparedness have been and will continue to be FEMA priorities. The Department has supported the development of a variety of course curricula, including:

- **Emergency Planning for Special Needs Communities**

The goal of the "Emergency Planning for Special Needs Communities" course is to introduce a strategic universal functional planning approach to initiate special needs planning. This approach will emphasize the role of emergency management and provide examples of best practices, lessons identified, tools, resources, and other support aids. The course material includes discussions on the emergency planning process to support special needs populations. It uses the National Response Framework's (NRF) definition of special needs populations, which is "populations whose members may have additional needs before, during, and after an incident in functional areas, including but not limited to:

- Maintaining independence
- Communication
- Transportation
- Supervision
- Medical care

- **Teen Community Emergency Response Team, Train-the-Trainer**

Developed in partnership with Eastern Michigan University, this program educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others following an event when professional responders are not immediately available on scene. Teen CERT training applies the CERT model to high school students and campuses. The Teen CERT Train-the-Trainer Course prepares instructors to deliver the CERT training to high school students and to work with school administrators to establish and maintain the training.

- **FEMA for Kids**

The FEMA for Kids website, <http://www.fema.gov/kids/>, features disaster related games, quizzes, stories, photos, cartoons and provides children with the opportunity to earn a Disaster

Action Kid certification. The site also offers information on preparing for disasters and coping with the aftermath, including guidance on how to create a supply kit and disaster plan, as well as specific information on Citizen Corps. The site offers access to an email server which regularly provides disaster news and information. Kids are also able to get information about ongoing disasters all over the country via an interactive map. Specific information is provided on preparing for and reacting to hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, volcanoes, floods, tsunamis, thunderstorms, wildfires, winter storms, and acts of terrorism.

Additionally, our Emergency Management Institute provides a variety of training opportunities, including:

- **Emergency Planning and Special Needs Populations field course (G197)** This 2-1/2 day course is intended to offer those with responsibilities for providing emergency planning or care for seniors, people with disabilities, and/or special needs groups with the skills and knowledge they will need to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergency situations. The target audience includes emergency managers, senior first response personnel, special needs coordinators, human services organization personnel, facility planners, community-based organizational personnel, advocacy group personnel, elected officials, public health personnel, and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) personnel.
- **Special Needs Planning Considerations for Emergency Management independent study course (IS-197.EM)** This course is designed for emergency management and first responder personnel to enable them to better understand the special needs population and teach them how to partner with persons with special needs as well as their support providers and organizations.

FEMA has also partnered with the American Red Cross to develop a Handbook called “Helping Children Cope with Disaster” to assist in educating parents and other child care providers on issues unique to children in disasters. And we have developed “Go-Kits” that will be distributed to all ten of our regions to assist States with the evacuation and sheltering needs of children during a catastrophic event.

In December 2007, Congress created a bipartisan National Commission on Children and Disasters (the “Commission”) to assess the needs of children as they relate to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. The Commission is evaluating existing laws, regulations, policies, and programs that affect children in disaster situations, and has been charged with submitting a report to the President and Congress on its specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations. An Interim Report is expected this fall, followed by a Final Report in 2010. Mr. Mark Shriver, Managing Director for the internationally recognized non-profit organization Save the Children, serves as chair of the Commission and has also served on FEMA’s National Advisory Council since 2007.

While we are eagerly awaiting the Commission’s findings and look forward to working with this Committee and Congress in implementing its recommendations, FEMA will not wait to move forward with new and innovative approaches to help protect children during disasters. Nor will

we simply rest on the progress our Agency has already made to improve emergency planning efforts that incorporate the needs of children. FEMA is meeting regularly with the Commission and planning to find ways to integrate Commission recommendations as they are available and consensus is reached.

Moving Forward: New Approaches For Protecting the Needs of Children

In addition to its work on the Commission, Save the Children also recently issued a report calling for immediate federal action to better protect our community's children in times of disaster. The report makes several recommendations, including the establishment of an Office for Children's Advocacy at FEMA. I am pleased to announce that in response to this report and as a result of ongoing discussions with the Commission, FEMA is creating a Children's Working Group.

The purpose of the working group is to create a centralized platform – across all of FEMA's directorates – to ensure that the needs of children are incorporated into all of our disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. Representatives from virtually all aspects of the agency will serve on the working group, which will be chaired by a senior member of the FEMA leadership team. The group will not only serve to create a common operating picture across FEMA, it will also improve our capacity to work collaboratively across the Federal government and with State and local partners in support of children's needs. This new team will advocate for children's issues at every stage of the planning process, rather than having the special needs of our most precious community members addressed as an afterthought.

More specifically, the Children's Working Group will focus on the following key areas:

- Child-specific guidance for evacuation, sheltering, and relocation;
- Tracking and reunification of families;
- Coordinated case management support;
- Enhanced preparedness for child care centers and schools as well as for children in child welfare and juvenile justice systems;
- Enhanced national planning, including incorporation of children into national planning scenarios and exercises;
- Incorporation of children's needs into grant guidance;
- Improved recovery coordination across the Federal government and with State, tribal and local partners in support of children's education, health and housing;
- Consideration as to how the Federal family can help ensure child care centers are able to rebuild and restore services more quickly following a disaster; and
- Increased public awareness efforts to educate families and protect children during disasters.

In short, the establishment of the Children's Working Group will provide an immediate forum for promoting the needs of children across the agency. It will allow us to move forward quickly in evaluating the recommendations of both the National Commission on Children and Disasters and non-governmental groups such as Save the Children.

It is our intent that the Children's Working Group will help identify and facilitate how best to integrate the special needs of children into all of our planning efforts without isolating children's issues from community issues at large.

This working group represents a new way of tackling and focusing on this issue, one that is aimed at integrating children's planning throughout the agency, coordinating among the federal family, and across the Nation. We are optimistic that this approach will create real, lasting change when it comes to our planning for, and treatment of, children's needs during disasters.

Conclusion

FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security are committed to advancing our Nation's preparedness by emphasizing the disaster needs of our Nation's most vulnerable citizens. Our efforts must begin with personal preparedness – a process of individual thinking and consideration of basic steps that each of us, and our families, must take to help prevent and prepare for the next disaster. We must focus on community preparedness, rather than merely just creating plans and guidance. Every citizen has a role to play in community preparedness.

In times of crisis, government plays a critical role in coordinating response and recovery efforts, especially in protecting and providing for the most vulnerable members of our population. The needs of children and other special needs members of our communities cannot simply fall to secondary planning considerations, but must be one of the central focuses of our planning, response and recovery.

While we have made significant strides toward this goal, we believe that even greater progress is within reach, thanks to our new Children's Working Group, valuable input from our partners and stakeholders, and the continued support of this Committee and Congress.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, for allowing me to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.