

Testimony of

Mark K. Shriver
Chairperson, National Commission on Children and Disasters

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“Children and Disasters: A Progress Report on Addressing
Needs”

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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. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

The Commission is especially grateful for the Subcommittee's continued focus on the recovery needs of children affected by disasters. The Commission's Interim Report contains 21 primary recommendations and 25 supporting statements to help guide implementation. For the purpose of today's hearing, I will focus my testimony on a few key areas.

Long-Term Recovery

The Commission strongly urged FEMA and the Obama Administration to aggressively intensify efforts to develop a National Disaster Recovery Framework. We are pleased that the President established a Long-Term Disaster Recovery Working Group and the Commission intends to make meaningful contributions to the report due to the President in April 2010 and the design of the framework, due in June 2010.

As noted in our Interim Report, the overarching principle for recovery from disasters must be to create self-sufficient families and a "new and improved normalcy" for all children, especially children who are socially and economically disadvantaged. The National Disaster Recovery Framework currently in development should specify services that must be provided to children affected by disasters, such as: safe, stable housing; access to physical, mental health and oral health services; academic continuity and supervised after-school activities; child care; adequate nutrition; and disaster case management. A specific federal entity should be designated with oversight, coordination

and guidance responsibilities, to create awareness of all forms of federal assistance to states and localities that address the needs of children and families affected by disasters.

Disaster Case Management Services

The Commission is pleased that FEMA and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) have recently come to terms on an Inter-Agency Agreement. In many respects, ACF's disaster case management implementation plan corresponds with the recommendations in the Interim Report. The ACF model is comprehensive in scope and focused on achieving measurable positive outcomes for children and families.

Importantly, ACF's program was originally intended to transfer responsibilities to local agencies as quickly as possible. However, FEMA prefers that disaster case management responsibilities transfer to the affected state. Recognizing the difficulties encountered in the state-led programs envisioned for Texas and Louisiana following Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, which resulted in extensive delays in the delivery of services, the Commission has posed the following questions to FEMA:

- How will FEMA assess a state's capability to continue case management services, once the ACF mission is concluded? What case management model will be implemented by the state?
- What will happen if FEMA determines that a state lacks capacity to assume management of the case management program at the expiration of the ACF mission?
- How will FEMA support ACF and states with pre-event guidance and funding to develop the capacity to perform case management services?

Child Care

There are nearly 12 million children under the age of five in child care each week. Child care providers must be prepared for disasters, not only to ensure children's safety and mental well-being in the face of danger, but also to facilitate recovery by providing support services for parents, guardians, employees and employers in the aftermath of a disaster.

The Commission sees the reauthorization of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) program as a prime opportunity to address the lack of basic disaster preparedness among child care providers across the nation. States and child care providers should be required to have minimum disaster preparedness standards in place to receive CCDBG funding. The Commission recommends requiring licensing and regulatory standards that include comprehensive all-hazards planning and staff training, which in turn must be coordinated with local and state disaster plans.

In addition, the Commission has been collaborating with FEMA to identify areas of potential disaster assistance for child care services. We are pleased that FEMA has committed to provide temporary facilities for child care providers that sustain damage beyond repair and to support states' efforts to stand up emergency child care facilities and provide emergency child care services for a very brief term in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. However, the Commission recommends a change in the Stafford Act that would allow FEMA to continue supporting the provision of child care services for a longer duration in the recovery phase and to provide assistance to affected families for placement of children in child care.

A major shortcoming of the Stafford Act is the inability to support the repair, restoration or rebuilding of private for-profit entities, such as child care facilities, that provide essential community services. Absent this, the Commission recommended an alternative measure, the authorization of an emergency child care contingency fund to not only help rebuild child care facilities but also assist state and local governments in meeting additional child care needs resulting from an influx of displaced families from other localities.

Sheltering and Housing

With assistance from FEMA, the American Red Cross, the American Academy of Pediatrics and several disaster partners, the Commission developed shelter standards and indicators responsive to the needs of children and a shelter supply list for infants and toddlers, which are included in the Interim Report.

We are now focused on establishing age ranges of children, from birth to 18, in order to facilitate consistent and comprehensive data collection by emergency shelters and other multi-agency mass care projects. More specific data on numbers of affected infants, toddlers, adolescents and teens will foster a more effective disaster response. For example, data collection on the ages of children may be used for the purposes of evacuee tracking and shelter intake to better anticipate children's needs, including age-appropriate equipment and supplies such as formula, diapers and medicines.

As noted in the Interim Report, children displaced following Hurricane Katrina experienced an average of three moves per child, which was highly disruptive to their education, as well as their psychological and social wellbeing. Therefore, immediate access to stable, adequate housing is a precondition for many other elements of a family's

recovery following a disaster, including returning children to schools and child care, returning parents to work and connecting children to health and mental health care providers. The Commission is collaborating with the National Disaster Housing Task Force to make families with children a priority for disaster housing assistance and to incorporate the unique considerations of families with children, such as proximity to schools and child care, into federal and state disaster housing guidance documents.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the subcommittee for today's hearing and for holding each of us accountable on our promises to make children a greater priority in disasters, especially as they struggle to recover from these traumatic and unsettling events.

The Commission delivered its Interim Report to President Obama and every member of Congress on October 14, 2009.

I believe the Interim Report has led to calls for change, but it must inspire action. While there are signs of progress, action has not come soon enough, and children continue to suffer from benign neglect.

Lessons learned and best practices are inadequate if not supported by changes in law and policy that remove barriers and instill confidence that children have become a priority in the way our nation prepares for, responds to, and recovers from disasters. All Americans, especially children, expect and deserve no less from us.

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.