

To: Friends and Colleagues

From: Irwin Redlener, M.D.
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&
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Director of Operation Assist

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Re: **Operation Assist Six Month Status Report**

It is hard to believe that six months have passed since **Operation Assist** was created in the days after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf coast and its inhabitants. As we are only a few months away from the next hurricane season, many of the families on the Gulf Coast continue to face challenges which would overwhelm most of us. The stories that they have to tell of their experiences and what their lives have become are shocking. I consider the situation a public health emergency and a crisis that will be with us for some time to come. With the help of our friends and supporters, we intend to stay with them as long as necessary, and ensure that these children and families are not forgotten.

In fact, we have committed to a sustainable effort by creating three new CHF Children's Health Projects located in Gulfport/Biloxi, Mississippi and New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In addition, because the need for mental health care is so tremendous, we have also created the Community Support and Resiliency Program. Mental health support and trainings are being provided in the impacted areas, and we will soon deploy specially designed mobile units, which can house group sessions as well as one-on-one counseling, all with complete privacy.

Because of the unique collaboration between CHF and the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, **Operation Assist** has been able to provide on-the-ground clinical services, informed by public health experts well versed in disaster response planning and policy. The public health team has been doing extensive surveying, looking carefully at the ongoing health needs and environmental challenges facing the communities still reeling from the impact of the storm.

As in past reports, I would like to take this opportunity to update you on Operation Assist's progress in the key areas: **medical and mental health services; public health; and policy/advocacy** activities.

- **CLINICAL SERVICES**

The development of this program is under the direction of **Arturo Brito, M.D., M.P.H.**, CHF's **Chief Medical Officer** and **Lynn Seim, M.S.N., R.N.**, CHF's **Senior Vice President, National Programs and Operations**.

Since Operation Assist began in September 2005, the national network staff has provided care at more than **13,000 patient encounters to victims and evacuees at 38 sites in Mississippi, Louisiana, Houston, Dallas and Austin, Texas, and Hempstead, NY.**

As the new projects in Biloxi/Gulfport, New Orleans and Baton Rouge move towards their long-term goals of comprehensive primary care, referrals to specialty and inpatient care, mental health services, and case management, they will continue to provide disaster related health care. Coastal Family Health Center is our partner in Mississippi and we are collaborating with Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics and Tulane University School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics in Louisiana.

Much of the work of the new projects in Louisiana involves working with our partners to provide health care to children and families in the FEMA trailer shelters where needs continue to be great. Operation Assist staff have also identified several large schools that have recently reopened where our programs will provide care. In Mississippi, housing projects and temporary clinics have been the focus; however the future goal is to focus on public schools as enrollment increases.

Operation Assist Emergency Medical Response Plan, Gulf Coast 2006

An emergency medical response plan is being developed for CHF's new projects in the Gulf Coast and will reflect lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. It will include procedures for evacuation, patient care, and other information needed should another storm impact the Gulf Coast. This plan will be produced and distributed by June 1st – the start of the next Hurricane season.

• COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND RESILIENCY PROGRAM

As expected in the aftermath of such a devastating disaster, mental health concerns are increasingly important, not surprising considering the high levels of stress and challenges families have been subjected to since the storm struck. Operation Assist's Community Support and Resiliency Program has been providing mental health support, interventions and education to children and families and others impacted psychologically by the disaster.

Paula Madrid, Psy.D., of the Mailman School of Public Health, is leading the project. Dr. Madrid has made 12 trips to the Gulf Coast since the storm hit. In Mississippi, Dr. Madrid has been running psychoeducational, stress management and support groups for the staff of a community mental health center who provide services in school clinics and who are themselves very traumatized. They have the dual challenge of recovering from their own losses while taking care of others. Dr. Madrid has conducted 6 groups with 13 participants each and has made a commitment to conduct monthly groups to continue assisting these professionals and preventing burn out and "compassion fatigue."

In Louisiana, Dr. Madrid has conducted two focus groups with members of school-based health centers to assess training and direct service needs. She is also leading monthly training sessions for school-based health center (SBHC) staff, with 45 attendees per group. These trainings will continue over the next few months. The focus of the trainings so far has been to teach the attendees how to understand trauma in children and how to assess and treat traumatized children. Future trainings will be on advanced treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and resilience building in children and families post disaster.

Community Support Mobile Units

As part of **Operation Assist's** Community Support and Resiliency Program we are establishing innovative new mobile units to provide mental health services integrated with primary care to the affected communities. These specially designed mobile units for our Gulf Coast Projects, the first of which is being built and deployed to Mississippi in April, will be staffed by professionals who specialize in trauma treatment and will provide services including support, intake, individual, group and family therapy, at pre-determined sites on a consistent basis.

- **PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION**

In addition to our clinical programs, we are in the process of planning and implementing further public health efforts under the **Operation Assist** umbrella, lead by Richard Garfield, R.N., Ph.D., Deputy Director for Public Health, Operation Assist:

Health Risk Assessment Survey in Louisiana

Operation Assist has just completed the first stage of a comprehensive rapid health assessment of displaced families from New Orleans. Forty public health professionals and volunteers (Masters of Public Health students from Columbia, Tulane and LSU) conducted the survey, and the results suggest that these children and families are in the midst of a public health and mental health crisis. Chronic diseases are going untreated, clinical-level anxiety and depression are on the rise, and the safety nets that had protected these vulnerable populations in the past have been badly shredded by the hurricanes and their aftermath.

The team, led by David Abramson, Ph.D. of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, spent 10 intensive days canvassing FEMA trailer parks, shelters and hotel sites in order to track and study the health and mental health needs of families and children who were evacuees from the hurricanes. The students reached over 650 families in metropolitan New Orleans and Baton Rouge and are in the process of analyzing the data. The results of this important assessment will inform the CHF Children's Health Projects in the Gulf of the specific health needs of affected children and their families and, especially, provide powerful data for state and local health planners. The findings will be released later this month.

Mold

Scientists from the Mailman School of Public Health, Department of Environmental Health Sciences are working in partnership with the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine to conduct studies of mold exposure and respiratory health in school-aged children evacuated from New Orleans. Phase I will measure the lung function of 100 children in one school in Jefferson Parish while providing some of them with home sampling equipment. All children in the school will receive a respiratory health questionnaire. Since our clinicians have reported that children who did not previously require medication to control asthma now do, the findings from this study will be very critical. This is the first stage of a 2 to 3 school project.

Turkey Creek Community Initiative

We are continuing to meet with the community leaders in Gulfport, Mississippi to explore a partnership with the Turkey Creek Community Initiative (an endangered historic African-American community), the Waterkeeper and other community-based organizations concerning the environmental and health access problems for this at-risk community.

Going Home Guide

Operation Assist staff are designing a "Going Home Guide" including a DVD for the specific health and safety needs of evacuees returning to their homes. The topics will range from information on mold and other contaminants, assessing symptoms and injury protection to guidelines on safe drinking water and re-establishing normalcy.

- **POLICY/ADVOCACY**

The current, precarious state of child health access in the Gulf Coast region is underscored by the fragile circumstances that pre-dated Hurricane Katrina. Child health indicators in Louisiana and Mississippi are among the nation's lowest and the child health delivery infrastructure under-resourced and inadequate. The Children's Health Fund is committed to advocating for improved quality and availability of comprehensive health care services in the Gulf Coast region and the development of a health system infrastructure that adequately addresses the needs of medically underserved communities.

CHF promoted this message to a national audience when it launched a caravan of new Operation Assist Mobile Medical Units headed for Gulfport, MS and New Orleans on the Today Show. The caravan then drove

to Washington, DC, where CHF unveiled its Gulf Coast health care recovery plan, the Medical Marshall Plan, to lawmakers.

The Medical Marshall Plan includes recommendations, based on nearly 20 years of health care service delivery and recent experience in the Gulf, for rebuilding the health care infrastructure. The Plan examines the dire situation that existed before and after Katrina and calls on lawmakers to take action including enacting an emergency Medicaid program, deploying more health professionals to the area, expanding emergency mental health services, and developing a transportation system that would enable access to care in disadvantaged communities. In addition to the Medical Marshall Plan, other policy white papers are being developed, which will inform advocacy efforts in support of Hurricane Katrina survivors as well as examination of future disaster preparedness needs.

CHF continues to meet with elected officials to advocate on behalf of thousands of people who were displaced and devastated by the hurricanes. Recently, CHF policy staff visited lawmakers to discuss the status of current relief efforts and shared the experiences of Operation Assist.

We will continue to keep you apprised of our efforts. Your support and commitment has enabled us to launch this important effort and to establish a permanent presence in these communities that will need our services well into the future. Again, thank you.