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Advocate photo by JOHN BALLANCE

Dr. Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

## Expert critical of FEMA's handling of mental health issues

BY JOHN BOYD  
Advocate staff writer

A national expert on children's health criticized FEMA in dealing with the mental health needs of Hurricane Katrina's youngest survivors and called for stronger leadership from the state government in providing assistance.

Speaking at an Advocate editorial board meeting Monday, Dr. Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund, painted a picture of bureaucratic deadlock that has left "tens of thousands of children...in serious limbo."

According to Redlener, as many as 49,000 families may be in need of assistance as FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, continues to empty displaced residents from agency trailers.

Redlener believes the agency is ill-equipped to serve the changing needs of those households as they transition into other living situations. The state could

help, Redlener said, but FEMA has been slow turning over the names of trailer residents.

As the state's remaining FEMA trailer parks empty, the worry increasingly becomes whether the persons to match these names will be lost to "Never-Never-Land," Redlener said.

"The fundamental fix to this would be, even before communities get set up, to make sure every family displaced out of FEMA trailers has a case worker able to provide assistance," Redlener said.

A recent study coauthored by Redlener found that more than half of trailer residents polled reported "significant mental health distress" and "fatalistic sentiments" two years after the August 2005 storm. More than 50 percent also reported that life was worse two years after the storm than immediately following it.

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In the past when times were hard, these residents relied on the support of family, friends and neighbors, Redlener said, but with many families still separated, the "social support networks" many survivors relied on are missing.

"People are truly left on their own in these truly dire circumstances," Redlener said.

Along with musician Paul Simon, Redlener established The

Children's Health Fund in 1987 to advocate for improved health care for underinsured and low-income children. The organization maintains 22 sites around the country and has sent its mobile medical units to disaster areas related to Hurricane Andrew in 1992, Ground Zero in New York in 2001 and the Gulf Coast following the landing of Hurricane Katrina.

"We expected to be in Louisiana a few months, but we're still here," Redlener said. "It has been quite a saga."

Redlener also is the director of Columbia University's Na-

tional Center for Disaster Preparedness and author of "Americans at Risk: Why We Are Not Prepared for Megadisasters and What We Can Do."

In the nearly three years since hurricanes Katrina and Rita bombarded the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts, he has worked on the ground with survivors in both states.

"Families are trying to deal with problems for which they have no resources," Redlener said. "It's demoralizing and frightening. These families are just trying to get their feet on the ground."