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EDITORIAL/LETTERS

Katrina Lessons

The lessons of Katrina have highlighted two important ways that the country will need to change its disaster relief before the next hurricane season begins in June. The federal government must do a better job of relocating evacuated families into permanent homes in functional communities instead of into hotels and trailer parks. And the authorities need to provide ongoing medical care for the displaced.

The link between the medical care and housing issues is clearly underscored in an alarming new report from the Children's Health Fund and the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. Researchers who studied families stranded in hotels and isolated trailer camps found that more than a third of the children suffered from conditions like asthma, anxiety and behavioral problems and that

many were going without prescribed medications.

The government's stress on temporary housing has taken a toll on these families, who have moved frequently — the average is 3.5 times — since the storm. About a quarter of the school-age children were either not enrolled in school or had missed huge chunks of school days. Among their parents, about half were managing chronic conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or cancer. Katrina did not cause these illnesses. But the stressful and chaotic conditions of the relief effort have clearly caused many of them to worsen.

The humanitarian emergency that has recently come to light in the Katrina belt should put the federal government on notice that furnishing medical care — and rebuilding medical services — must be the first priority in disasters like this one.