
May 9, 2006

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Orphans of the Storm

By IRWIN REDLENER

IF you thought that the government's response to last year's Hurricane Katrina was a shocking display of mismanagement and incompetence, you should see what's happening to the displaced children of families now trapped in FEMA's trailer parks and other shelters.

Hurricane Katrina and the floods that followed destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes, forcing out more than one million people. Some families have found housing and jobs in communities that could accommodate the influx, but a far bleaker reality faces the rest.

FEMA has not released exact numbers, but school officials estimate that displaced children from Louisiana alone number more than 125,000. Most of their families were living in poverty before the hurricane. Now they subsist in tiny trailers, hastily assembled by the government in remote fields with few dependable services, little access to community resources and no sense of when they will be able to return to some version of normal life.

Several recent studies, including one by Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health and the Children's Health Fund, reveal that unmet health care needs among these displaced families are far worse than any of us imagined.

One in three children in FEMA-subsidized shelters has at least one chronic illness like asthma requiring medical care. Half of the children who had access to medical care before the storm no longer do. And although nearly half the parents in the shelters report that their children exhibit symptoms of emotional or behavioral disorders, the evaluation and treatment they urgently need is almost impossible to secure.

Health isn't the only problem for those languishing in FEMA shelters. Nearly one in four school-age children is either not enrolled in school or misses 10 days of class every month. Many who do attend school in their temporary host communities find the classrooms overcrowded, the staff exhausted and stress levels unbearably high.

Thanks to the hard work of local officials and Congressional delegations from the affected states, billions of dollars will be available to repair levees, rebuild communities and re-establish the economy of the Gulf Coast. But this will take years, far too long for the children who are now suffering and waiting in FEMA's shelters. They urgently require an emergency relief package that directly addresses their most pressing health care needs.

For \$100 million — a small fraction of the billions allocated for reconstruction — the government could support a force of at least 200 pediatricians and family doctors, 100 specially trained mental health workers, 25 mobile medical units and a much strengthened school-based health care network throughout the gulf region. It could also put vital health care information in a computer database and set up virtual access to medical centers for children who can't get to specialists' offices.

We are watching the worst children's health crisis in modern American history unfold in the gulf area. After the trauma of Hurricane Katrina, this secondary disaster — again under the auspices of the United States Department of Homeland Security — may have far more serious consequences. Thousands of children are now seemingly abandoned by a federal government still unable to function effectively when it counts the most.

Irwin Redlener is the director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia and the president of the Children's Health Fund.

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
