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Report: Katrina-displaced children have health problems

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Children still displaced by Hurricane Katrina suffer extraordinary physical and mental-health problems, including an extremely high rate of iron-deficiency anemia, according to a report by the New York-based Children's Health Fund.

Irwin Redlener, president of

The Children's Health Fund, said Tuesday that before the problem snowballs into an unmanageable crisis, Gov. Bobby Jindal must make the health of these children a priority.

"We have no one with the resources to provide services taking responsibility to provide for these children," said Redlener, a pediatrician who is also a pro-

fessor at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health.

The Children's Health Fund, founded in 1987 by Redlener and singer/songwriter Paul Simon, works toward providing comprehensive health care to medically underserved children.

State Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary Alan

Levine said in a telephone interview Tuesday that his agency has been asking the Federal Emergency Management Agency to serve the children or to assist the state with that task when the issue of formaldehyde in FEMA trailers first came to light eight months ago.

"It's extremely frustrating

when we're talking about the health of children that there would be any delay," Levine said.

He said the state is prepared to serve the children, but needs resources from the federal government. At the very least, the state needs information on the identities of the children, so the state can find and serve them,

Levine said.

"I'm absolutely prepared to step in and do this (without FEMA)," he said. "I was surprised to find out they weren't doing it."

When pressed on whether the state is creating a plan to serve the children with or without

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federal help — as The Children's Health Fund is calling for — Levine responded that his agency is working on a plan by first validating the results of The Children's Health Fund report. He also said Redlener has never met with him.

What the doctors found

The mobile clinics, run by a partnership of The Children's Health Fund and LSU Baton Rouge Children's Health Project, treated children living at Renaissance Village trailer park in Baker that FEMA closed in May. Other children were treated on school campuses across Baton Rouge.

The Children's Health Fund report, released Nov. 4, analyzed medical records of 261 children, ranging from infants to 19-year-olds, who received medical services from mobile clinics in Baton Rouge. The children were served from January through August, and the sample represents all children served during that period.

Roughly half of the children treated by these clinics are believed to be displaced, and the others are impoverished children living in Baton Rouge, Redlener said.

Among the report's findings: 41 percent of children under age 4 had iron-deficiency anemia because of inadequate nutrition, Redlener said.

"A lot of these kids are hungry," he said.

In young children, anemia affects brain development and can lead to long-term cognitive problems, the report says.

Among the treated children living in FEMA trailers, 42 percent had allergic rhinitis and/or upper respiratory infections resistant to the usual allergy treatments, Redlener said.

Twenty-four percent of treated children in FEMA trailers had a cluster of upper respiratory, allergic and dermatological ailments that could reflect the trailer park conditions, the report says. These conditions include overcrowding and exposure to

formaldehyde.

Other findings include:

- Nearly half of the treated children required a specialty medical visit, and 12 percent of those required two or more specialists.

- 36 percent had persistent middle ear infections or wax embedded in the ear canal.

- 27 percent had a hearing or vision problem.

- 42 percent of children ages 3 and older needed either developmental or mental-health services.

- 55 percent of children ages 6 to 11 had a behavior or a learning problem.

Problem's extent unknown

The degree to which these children represent the greater population of an estimated 25,000 to 35,000 displaced children in Louisiana and Mississippi is unknown, Redlener said.

The children in the report may be among the "worst of the worst" in medical needs, Redlener said. Because most of the displaced children can't be found and tracked, no one knows their health status, he said.

In the three years since Katrina struck, he said, state and federal agencies have passed the blame and responsibility of care for these children among each other.

FEMA has yet to set up a program to track and find services for the children, Redlener said. The funding for FEMA's case management program expires in March.

Redlener said that's why Jindal needs to create a task force of private and public medical providers.

He said he and others with The Children's Health Fund have met with the Louisiana Recovery Authority and with Jindal's deputy chief of staff about creating a task force, but no progress has been made.

Jindal's press staff, when contacted Tuesday for comment, referred the call to Levine.

► ON THE INTERNET:

The Children's Health Fund
<http://www.childrenshealthfund.org>