

Children of disaster need help

BY IRWIN REDLENER and MARK K. SHRIVER

Thu, Sep. 02, 2010

Five years ago, Hurricane Katrina almost destroyed most of the Gulf Coast region, displacing more than a million Gulf coast residents and causing thousands of deaths and injuries. As much as Katrina was a disaster of unprecedented scale, it also revealed a nation woefully unprepared to respond to a large-scale catastrophic event.

Our failure to meet the needs of children manifested itself appallingly during Hurricane Katrina.

- The storm initially displaced almost 200,000 children from the Gulf region.
- Following the storm, it took six months for all of the 5,192 children separated from their families to be reunited.
- More than 50,000 children did not regularly attend school during the academic year that started just after Katrina struck the Gulf.
- Long-term studies of children directly affected by Katrina find they are five times as likely to have serious emotional disturbances.

Less progress made

Americans assumed that the lessons from Katrina and its consequences would drive major improvements in disaster planning. But the disaster that was originally billed as a wake-up call turns out to be more like a snooze alarm. Many states, including Florida, have made substantially less progress than we would have expected, particularly with regards to protecting children.

A new report from Save the Children's U.S. Programs finds that Florida misses two out of four key safeguards to protect children should a disaster strike, including requiring childcare centers to have a plan for evacuating kids and a plan for accommodating children in childcare with special needs. And Florida's not alone. Only 12 states meet the four minimum standards, revealing a widespread issue of national concern.

The National Commission on Children and Disasters approved a milestone report on Monday, which revealed very little progress on the federal level since Katrina to protect children. Among the findings are seriously underfunded federal programs for school disaster preparedness, poor coordination among federal agencies and lack of preparedness in our private health care system, including a disturbing finding that only 6 percent of hospital emergency rooms carry essential pediatric equipment.

Given that there are 67 million children in school and childcare on any given weekday and more than 90 percent of America is vulnerable to a natural disaster, these findings are appalling.

Two recently released studies from the Children's Health Fund found that half of children affected by Katrina have persistent serious emotional distress. And following the BP oil spill disaster, one-third of children living within ten miles of the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts are reported to have medical or psychological symptoms along with great difficulty securing needed medical attention.

Meeting kids' needs

While progress is frustratingly slow in the federal government and in Florida, there is also hope. Last year, FEMA established the Children's Working Group to better meet the needs of children within that agency and across the federal government. The National Disaster Medical System, which leads the federal medical response to an emergency, hired a pediatrician as deputy chief medical officer, recognizing the special needs of children in emergency medicine. And many recommendations from the National Commission's and Save the Children's reports are embodied in legislation introduced by Sens. Mary Landrieu (D-LA) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN).

These small steps, however, are too small when matched against a need that is too great.

Throughout U.S. history, when we've set out to achieve seemingly impossible goals or eliminate threats, we've done great things in very little time. In five years each, we put the Model T into production, built the transcontinental railroad and won World War I and World War II.

On the urgent need to have a first-class disaster response system, however, we've achieved only a fraction of the kind of intense achievements that made America a beacon to the world. This inaction not only betrays the needs of our children, but the American spirit of accomplishment as well.

Dr. Irwin Redlener is president of Children's Health Fund and Mark K. Shriver is senior vice president for Save the Children's U.S. Programs. Both serve on the National Commission on Children and Disasters.