



National Center for
Disaster Preparedness

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4 YEARS AFTER THE STORMS, FAILED RECOVERY STILL FAILING CHILDREN

NATIONAL RECOVERY FRAMEWORK STILL ABSENT

August 28, 2009 – (New York) – Four years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf region, unresolved conflicts among state, federal and health sector players have paralyzed the decision-making process, holding up community reconstruction and the development of plans to rebuild the devastated health care system of New Orleans, while families wait for vital medical services to get up to speed. Analyses by the National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University suggest that as many as 20,000 to 30,000 children may remain in temporary and unstable housing throughout the region as a result of the stalemate in planning and implementation. Persistent disagreements between federal and local officials about resources and responsibilities for assisting families have remained problematic.

“4 years later there is still a misunderstanding that recovery from large-scale disasters is a ‘local problem’ to be solved and managed by states and local jurisdiction,” said Dr. Irwin Redlener, Director of the Center. “The destruction at the level seen in the Gulf post-Katrina and Rita and the flooding of New Orleans was –and is –a national problem. The well-being of the affected states is highly material to the well-being, the economy and security of the United States.”

Although a 2006 law required the U.S. to prepare a “National Recovery Framework”, that task has not yet been accomplished. According to Dr. Redlener, also president of Children’s Health Fund (CHF) “the absence of an effective recovery strategy makes it difficult to respond to the persistent needs of families affected by Katrina and leaves the region vulnerable to a similar outcome with respect to future disasters in the Gulf or elsewhere.”

The Children’s Health Fund spearheaded “Operation Assist” within days of Hurricane Katrina. The program began as a clinical response effort to provide assistance with the acute medical and mental health response for survivors and evacuees. It has since transitioned to permanent projects in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Biloxi-Gulfport, becoming integral components of the still recovering health care systems in the region. Thus far, the clinical programs have provided more than 100,000 medical, mental health and special service outreach to children and adolescents. In addition, the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and Children’s Health Fund spearheaded comprehensive trainings to local mental health professionals on critical topics such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Compassion Fatigue/Burnout in Providers, and to date has held close to 70 workshops that trained over 1,000 local professionals impacting thousands of children. Mailman’s NCDP has also been conducting one of the largest face-to-face cohort studies of children and families in the Gulf since 2006. Approximately one thousand families are interviewed at least annually.

Some of the persistent concerns and issues identified in these interviews include:

- Four years after the storms which destroyed much of New Orleans's health system, including Charity Hospital, there is still no final plan to rebuild the hospital or restructure the health care system;
- Understanding the needs of children in all aspects of disaster response planning, mitigation and recovery remains incomplete;
- There is a continuing need to address the significant number of displaced children and the mental and physical health as well as educational impact displacement may have on the approximately 30,000 persistently displaced children in the two principle states in the Gulf; and,
- Hurricane Katrina had a profound effect on New Orleans' Mental Health System which has yet to recover. Recent budget cuts are threatening the closure of The New Orleans Adolescent Hospital on September 1, 2009.

The National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health is an academically-based resource center dedicated to the study, analysis and enhancement of the nation's ability to prepare for and respond to major disasters, including terrorism. The NCDP has a wide-ranging research, training and education, and advocacy agenda, with a special interest in mega-disasters. Senior faculty and staff have testified at Congressional hearings, presented at numerous conferences and meetings, and consulted with governmental, healthcare, non-profit, industry, and community leaders. The NCDP engages the public health workforce and communities in preparing for catastrophic events, while helping to integrate preparedness efforts into the nation's existing infrastructure. The Center encompasses the CDC-funded Center for Public Health Preparedness at Columbia, which has trained over 15,000 responders in public health preparedness, incident management, and recognition and response to incidents involving weapons of mass destruction using table-top drills, exercises, and distance learning technologies. For more information, visit www.mailman.columbia.edu or www.ncdp.mailman.columbia.edu.

Children's Health Fund (CHF), Founded in 1987 by pediatrician/advocate Irwin Redlener, MD, and singer/songwriter Paul Simon, the Children's Health Fund (CHF) works nationally to advocate on behalf of all children and to develop health care programs for the most medically under-served population-homeless and disadvantaged children. CHF's 22 pediatric programs and 2 affiliates in 15 states and DC have provided essential primary care services in more than 1.8 million patient visits via mobile medical clinics. In response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, CHF established three permanent projects in the Gulf Coast area, New Orleans, LA, Gulfport, MS and Baton Rouge, LA. For more information about CHF visit: www.childrenshealthfund.org

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