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Leaders Adding Children to Emergency Plans

By Matt Korade, CQ Staff

Without significantly increasing spending, the federal government can ensure that its disaster plans take into account children, a group that makes up fully a quarter of the U.S. population, two major players in emergency response said Monday.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Craig W. Fugate and Sen. Mary L. Landrieu, D-La., told a standing-room only crowd at the National Press Club that they are working within both the executive and legislative branches to make sure the government doesn't exclude children from its disaster plans.

Rather than take a one-size-fits-all approach to emergency preparedness and response, FEMA is considering what individual communities need, Fugate said. Planning for children is a big part of that.

“We’re taking the approach that the public is not a liability, they’re the resource, and we have to build our response around [them],” Fugate said.

He added that FEMA is taking whatever steps it can administratively, outside of legislative action, to include children in its emergency plans, and he has appointed a senior staff member to assess how the government addresses children’s needs at every stage of a disaster.

The agency should be able to re-prioritize, rather than simply increase, its budget to address any changes, he said.

Some practical conclusions FEMA has reached include recognizing the need to reopen schools and day-care centers as quickly as possible after a disaster. Fugate and others said such facilities provide children with stability and parents with the freedom to re-establish their lives, find jobs and rebuild.

Landrieu, chairwoman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee’s Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery, said she plans to introduce legislation in the next few weeks to address many of the recommendations of the National Commission on Children and Disasters. Created in the fiscal 2008 omnibus spending law ([PL 110-161](#)) to examine the needs of children during emergencies, the commission approved an [interim report](#) last month that identified several gaps in disaster preparedness, including problems emergency shelters, medical and mental health clinics, schools and child care facilities.

The main recommendations of the report include:

- making children an immediate priority of White House and the Federal Emergency Management Agency planning
- adopting national standards for disaster planning at facilities that serve or house children, such as schools, group homes and juvenile justice centers
- adopting national standards to provide a safe and secure emergency shelter environment for children, including access to age-appropriate services and supplies
- requiring state child care regulatory agencies to include disaster planning in standards for receiving child care licenses
- including training in children's mental health and behavior in preparedness and response activities.

Landrieu said the bill will have an easier time garnering support if it does not have a big price tag attached to it.

"It's not really an issue of money, it's just an issue of organization and political will," Landrieu said.

The senator also said she would like to focus on the need for mental health counseling in communities affected by a major disaster.

"Nothing quite prepares you for the destruction of an entire metropolitan area or a big part of it," Landrieu said. "As children watch their parents go through such anxiety in disasters, think about it: they've lost their home, their job, their church, their place of worship, their neighbors are gone, their family structures are gone . . . at least the school and the day care could provide some group counseling to children who need to understand not only what's happened around them but also what's happening inside their own family at this particular time."

Mark Shriver, vice president and managing director for U.S. programs at the child advocacy group Save the Children and a member of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, said the federal government can influence the kinds of training first responders receive through the grant process.

"Do the emergency management organizations have the right equipment and are first responders trained to take care of kids?" Shriver asked. "The answers to both questions is 'no'."

The commission plans to deliver its report to President Obama and Congress and simultaneously release the document on its Web site Oct. 14, said Vinicia M. Mascarenhas, the panel's communications director. A final report from the commission is due in October 2010. report include:

- Making children an immediate priority of White House and the Federal Emergency Management Agency planning.
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At another point, she added "As children watch their parents go through such anxiety in disasters, think about it: they've lost their home, their job, their church, their place of worship, their neighbors are gone, their family structures are gone ... at least the school and the day care could provide some group counseling to children who need to understand not only what's happened around them but also what's happening inside their own family at this particular time."

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