

Children and Disasters Panel Sends Recommendations to Obama and Congress

By Matt Korade, CQ Staff

A congressionally created commission on protecting children in disasters sent its final report to President Obama and lawmakers Wednesday, with the hope that the document could open up the possibility of action in the next legislative session.

Christopher J. Revere, executive director of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, said the [report](#) identifies public health gaps that Congress could close next year, when a law outlining the federal response to pandemic disease and other hazards comes up for reauthorization.

The law ([PL 109-417](#)) currently lumps children in with other “at-risk” groups, which the panel has called inaccurate. Children make up about a quarter of the population and need to be treated as a separate group with its own special needs, the commissioners have said.

“We hope Congress would take a stronger stance and direct the Department of Health and Human Services to deal specifically and separately with children and report back on an annual basis,” Revere said Wednesday.

The report recommends that lawmakers, HHS, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency take steps to ensure that medical countermeasures developed specifically for children are available in cases of pandemic disease and attacks using weapons of mass destruction.

Federal agencies should provide pediatric training and resources to their medical response teams and other health care professionals, the report said. They should also provide funding to build up regional surge capacity of hospitals to treat children during emergencies, it said.

Additionally, the report called for Obama and lawmakers to put one agency in charge of coordinating grants, research, and policies for providing emergency medical services to children.

The report makes more than 100 recommendations. Revere said a few areas of special concern include:

- Improving disaster planning in environments that serve children, including schools, child care, child welfare agencies and juvenile justice systems.
- Developing effective mental health services for children caught up in disasters, including “psychological first aid” counseling and bereavement support.
- Reaching beyond the federal government to more fully integrate children into disaster planning at the state and local level.

“We purposely made many of the recommendations viable for federal, state and local implementation,” Revere said.

FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate said his agency is committed to continuing its work with state and local partners, as well as with the commission, to address the distinct needs of children and other groups.

“Children are a part of every community, but too often they have been left out of emergency planning or only considered as an afterthought,” Fugate said. “It’s critical that emergency managers plan for the needs of all survivors, not just some of them, and that requires fully integrating children, the elderly, and people with disabilities into all planning and coordination efforts.”

In August 2009, Fugate established a working group to lead the efforts of federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations on caring for children during disasters. Over the last year, FEMA has also sent supplies for children and infants to locations across the Eastern Seaboard during preparations for Hurricane Earl in late-August, clarified guidance on how 2010 grants can be used to strengthen emergency services for children, and completed an agreement with HHS’s Administration for Children and Families on the rapid deployment of case managers to disaster areas, FEMA spokeswoman Rachel Racusen said.

Congress established the 10-member, bipartisan commission in 2007 ([PL 110-161](#)). Although the delivery of the report fulfills the commission’s work, some in Congress have proposed extending the panel’s mandate. In July, the House passed a bill to reauthorize the commission through 2013. Under the legislation ([HR 5266](#)), sponsored by Florida Democratic Rep. Corrine Brown, the panel would produce another report by the end of 2012 and close shop six months after that. The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee was assigned the measure, but has yet to take it up.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the bill would cost \$4 million from fiscal years 2011 through 2013. Sen. Christopher J. Dodd has introduced companion legislation ([S 3897](#)).

Another bill pending before the committee incorporates some of the committee’s final recommendations, including provisions to include mental health counseling for pre-kindergarten students and develop disaster guidance that providers of the Medicaid and Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) would use to ensure displaced children have access to medical care.

The bill ([S 2898](#)) was introduced by Democrat Sens. Mary L. Landrieu of Louisiana and Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, and Republicans Thad Cochran of Mississippi and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee. Brown has introduced companion legislation ([HR 5240](#)) in the House.

Landrieu spokesman Robert Sawicki said the senator is pleased with the commission’s work and would like to see the panel’s charter extended. “She thinks they have worked systematically and shown a lot of diligence in the implementation phase,” Sawicki said. “They’re not interested in just filing a report and leaving it on a shelf to collect dust.”

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