

Public Comment  
National Commission on Children and Disasters  
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Speaker:  
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My name is Nancy Beers. I am the director of Disaster Services and Camp Noah, from Lutheran Social Service of MN. Camp Noah is a week-long disaster recovery day camp for children in Kindergarten – 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

First, I want to sincerely thank this committee for the work you are doing on behalf of families, especially children, in disaster. As a veteran of disaster work, much of it as a long-term recovery caseworker, I know personally how difficult disaster recovery is. So, I look at the work you are doing with great hope.

Recently all of us have seen despair on the faces of children in Haiti. And I am sure you fear, like I do, that for most of these children, their life will be defined by this one catastrophic event. Unfortunately, after a disaster, children do not just lose their possessions and homes, but often their sense of security, innocence, sometimes their entire childhood.

Camp Noah believes that a child's life **need not be** defined by disaster – but when given the right tools, can work through their disaster story and use the skills they have learned to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

Camp Noah's week-long day camps are held in a play centered congregate setting - bringing together children that have only one thing in common – a disaster story to tell. It binds these young survivors together in a special way - children helping children heal.

In Iowa last summer, I had the privilege of being the small group leader to a rambunctious group of fifth graders. One of my campers, Kevin, was obviously a troubled child. His behavior was erratic and unpredictable. His peers tolerated him, but he was definitely an outsider. As day one's theme, 'I am somebody special' began to sink in, we began to see some slight, positive changes in Kevin. By day two, 'telling your story', where we talk about identifying feelings, especially worry and fear, Kevin began to share more. By day three, 'grief and loss', Kevin was more engaged and I could tell he was beginning to trust us – that we did care about him – that he really was somebody special. As the class was quietly journaling, Kevin, head down, staring at his shoes, suddenly began to tell his story. He spoke so quickly I could barely follow his family's horrific story of survival against all odds. He talked wildly for nearly five minutes, explaining graphic details, one event tumbling into the next. His classmates, without ever looking up from their own work, listened intently, silently. Tears rolled down Kevin's face.

Then a small miracle happened! A girl, a pretty, popular girl, walked over to Kevin, knelt down beside him, touched his shoulder and with tears in her own eyes, said "Kevin, I am so sorry".

Then one by one – not all – but most – said things like, “wow that must have been really hard”, or “I didn’t know that happened to you!”

Then, as if the veil had been lifted, other children began to share their stories of grief and loss, some flood related, some just life events.

By day four – on gifts and talents – they were more than willing to help identify each other’s unique gifts and that girl that hugged Kevin - she cut out a heart - wrote courage on it - and taped it to Kevin’s “I am somebody special” poster. Kevin beamed!

By Camp Noah providing Kevin an environment of trust and safety – where Kevin was willing to share his deepest despair – when a young girl was willing to show him compassion and sympathy and then to acknowledge his gift of courage - I believe Kevin’s life was transformed and perhaps all the lives of all those children who bonded together in a special way that week.

This is the power of Camp Noah – this is the complex – delicate –important work we do. We change lives – the lives of children who by no fault of their own – have had to survive tragedy and hardship and surrender part of their childhood to disaster.

Although Camp Noah is free to every child – it costs \$500/child. For only \$500! a child can be transformed from fearful to confident, from hopeless to hopeful, from someone stuck in their own pain, to someone helping others move past their pain. We desperately need financial partners to continue this important work. We are hoping someone today will hear our message of bringing hope to children and help us locate the support we need to insure that Camp Noah will be there the next time disaster strikes.

Thank you for your time.

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