

## CQ HOMELAND SECURITY

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Bringing Children to the Forefront, Panel Recommends Sweeping Changes to Disaster Plans

By Matt Korade, CQ Staff

The National Commission on Children and Disasters has publicly released a report recommending government agencies integrate the special needs of children into their disaster plans.

The [report](#), which was sent Tuesday to President Obama and every member of Congress, makes 21 recommendations across 11 areas, including physical and mental health care, education, housing and social services for children.

First among the recommendations: Distinguish children from other at-risk, vulnerable or special-needs groups, such as the elderly or disabled, and speed up the development a national disaster recovery strategy that emphasizes children's services.

Congress required a general disaster recovery plan in the 2006 overhaul of the Federal Emergency Management Agency ([PL 109-295](#)), but the strategy has not been completed.

Mark Shriver, a member of the commission and vice president and managing director for U.S. programs at the children's advocacy group Save the Children, said government agencies, nonprofits, and advocacy organizations — including his own — have not been quick enough to bring children to the forefront of their disaster plans.

"Kids don't have political muscle, they don't give money, it's hard to get their needs addressed," Shriver said.

Those needs can be seen in the lack of federal dollars to help children still dealing with mental trauma and illness from Hurricane Katrina more than three years after government aid for that purpose dried up, Shriver said. Those needs can be seen, he said, in the failure to provide emergency childcare for working parents following a disaster, which would prop up childcare centers while allowing parents earn an income when they need it most. Those needs can be seen in a fragmented case-management system that provides services for housing or education or social needs, but without regard for what is needed most.

"The fact that the federal government hasn't worked out a case-management system in a comprehensive, holistic, rapid manner is outrageous," Shriver said.

Shriver said he met Tuesday with President Barack Obama and Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s staffs to discuss the commission's recommendations, one of which is to create a special advisory panel of senior White House and National Security Council staff to focus presidential policy on children and disasters. He said he generally received positive feedback from them, as well as from Sens. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., and Mary L. Landrieu, D-La.

Landrieu, who chairs the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery, said earlier this month at a discussion of the commission's pending recommendations that she is drafting legislation to address children's preparedness issues in a low-cost way, a strategy she believes will help the bill gather support.

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

Shriver said Tuesday that some things, such as requiring child-care centers to have evacuation plans, could be tied to licensing and federal reimbursements without the need for new federal spending. But other things, such as doubling the duration of federal dollars for mental health services from nine to 18 months, would require more money.

"If we really believe that kids are our most valuable resource, we should invest in them and stop giving them lip service," Shriver said.

Non-legislative changes to disaster policy are also underway, at FEMA and the Red Cross.

In August, FEMA created a "Children's Working Group" to evaluate how best to integrate into its plans several issues also raised by the commission's report. These include providing child-specific guidance for evacuations, sheltering and relocation, for tracking and reunifying families, for coordinating case-management, and for providing assistance to child-care centers, schools, child-welfare agencies and juvenile justice systems around the country.

The Children's Working Group, which is made up of employees from across FEMA, is also assessing the agency's ability to collaborate with other federal departments and non-governmental organizations that provide aid to children. The Red Cross, meanwhile, began working with the commission in July to develop a set of standards for meeting the needs of children staying at emergency shelters.

Shriver said the commission's work will continue into next year, when the panel releases a final report proposing additional recommendations on such issues as housing and the juvenile-justice system, and gauging progress on those suggestions it has already made.

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