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Reuniting Fractured Families After a Disaster: The Role of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

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ALTHOUGH THE HURRICANE season of 2005 was one of the worst on record, 2 storms, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, were particularly devastating to the Gulf Coast region. Among the other tragedies came the news that nearly 5000 children became dislocated from their families as a result of these 2 storms.

LONG-TERM PREPARATIONS

Before the hurricanes, the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) had systems for locating missing children in place: a 24-hour hotline, a database of missing children, and connections with law enforcement throughout the United States and the world. The success of NCMEC is well documented; they have a recovery rate of 96% in the long-term cases with which they deal. They have become the nation's primary resource to work with law enforcement in the search for missing children. Technology has become the hallmark of searching for missing children. The use of computers, digital images, and the media has led to great improvements in finding these children.

NCMEC had created programs by using retired law enforcement officers to assist in the search for missing children in the many locales where there may not be adequate resources. Project ALERT (America's Law Enforcement Retiree Team) is a program wherein these retired officers assist local police and sheriff's departments who may not have officers fully trained in missing child cases.

A second program sponsored by the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation was patterned after the National Transportation Safety Board's Go Team program. When there is a plane crash or other transportation emergency,

a specialist from the Go Team is sent directly to the scene to evaluate and assist local officials. Similarly, NCMEC has developed Team Adam, a group of retired law enforcement officers and agents, each of whom is an expert in the field of child abduction and missing children. They are sent to the scene in serious abduction cases to advise and assist the local police chief or sheriff, provide technology or other support, and ensure that every possible resource is used during those early critical moments when a child's life might depend on it. They don't have law enforcement authority or arrest power or carry weapons. They purely and simply are advisors.

ONE WEEK AFTER LANDFALL

When Hurricane Katrina hit, the devastation became apparent. Although there was concern for property damage, the first priority quickly became getting people to safety. In the ensuing chaos, many families were fractured and ended up in several locations. In many cases, children were separated from parents, caretakers, or other loved ones as they moved from their homes, to the Louisiana Superdome, to the Reliant Astrodome, and elsewhere. Records were sparse or nonexistent. Because communication systems were compromised, the

Key Words: Hurricane Katrina, missing children, disaster planning

Abbreviation: NCMEC, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children

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nation suddenly was faced with an acute disaster-related missing children crisis.

In response, NCMEC was asked by the US Department of Justice on September 1 (3 days after landfall) to get involved and spearhead the effort to find these missing children and reunite them with their families. NCMEC enthusiastically responded after contacting the Red Cross to make sure that these efforts were not duplicative and were, in fact, helpful.

However, NCMEC could not divert resources that were already in place to find other children. Parents of previously missing children needed to be reassured that NCMEC was not suspending the search for their children or making their children a lesser priority in light of Hurricane Katrina. The work on the children missing or displaced as a result of the hurricane and the search for America's other missing children had to take place concurrently.

In response, NCMEC created a new hotline with a unique toll-free number and immediately began to try to establish it in the public eye and mind. The NCMEC Web site (www.missingkids.com) was used as Katrina central, a place where people could go to see photographs of the missing and access the list of reported missing children.

Retired law enforcement officers from across the country working with Project ALERT and Team Adam were brought in to answer the Katrina telephones, do the callbacks and other follow-up, perform the analytical, investigative work to locate the missing, and work with NCMEC staff in many other ways. Team Adam members were dispatched to the affected states immediately. They went into the shelters, took photographs of the children, and worked with state and local law enforcement, social services personnel, the state missing children's clearinghouses, and every other possible resource.

Generally, photographs of missing children are one of the most important tools. After Katrina, most of the parents who were separated from their children had lost everything in the storm or the subsequent flood, including photographs of their children. By and large, without photographs, NCMEC had to create its own search tools, particularly in the early days. The quality of information was very poor. There were many resources being created for people to list information about missing loved ones. As valuable as they were, they still essentially were passive vehicles. Someone had to actively go search the database to find a missing family member.

In addition, most of the technological advances developed over the past 2 decades that have led to the dramatic increase in success in finding missing children were of little value in finding and reuniting the children lost after Katrina because of lack of availability in the hurricane and shelter areas. Thus, old-fashioned techniques, including ingenuity and persistence, took precedence.

In one widely reported story, one of the Team Adam representatives went into a special-needs shelter in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where there were a number of unaccompanied children, many of whom were very young. He worked with Louisiana social workers in trying to gather information. In one instance, he took a digital photograph of a 2-year-old. Then he showed her the picture. The little girl responded with one word: "Gabby." A lead! Thinking that might be the child's name, Team Adam notified NCMEC headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, where caseworkers began searching databases, looking for a 2-year-old whose name could be shortened to Gabby. They found a 2-year-old named Gabrielle who had been reported missing and whose mother had been evacuated to a shelter in San Antonio, Texas. Realizing that the children in the shelter were likely from the same area, an attempt was made to match other children with the parents in the San Antonio facility. Little Gabby and other children in that same shelter were flown to San Antonio and reunited with their parents.

In another case, a 5-year-old in a Louisiana shelter was able to give a lot of information: his name, address, church, school, and even his mother's cell phone number. However, cell phones were not working. By checking with people from the child's neighborhood, the team located one of his mother's friends, who told authorities that the mother was at the Reliant Astrodome but had been moved, probably to an evacuee hotel. After calling several hotels in Houston, Texas, the mother was located, and her child was flown via Angel Flight to Houston, where they were reunited.

NCMEC essentially had created a parallel missing children's program by using space made available by temporarily suspending some noncritical activities while ensuring that its core mission of the past 21 years (finding missing children) would not be compromised.

The procedure used in processing each case was to take a call from a searching parent or close family member, make a report on the missing child, and then do callbacks to verify and validate the information. When there was enough information on the missing child, it was entered into the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) National Crime Information Center missing person's database. NCMEC worked hand-in-hand with the FBI and state and local law enforcement. When possible, they got photographs from family members. Team Adam volunteers on the ground took photographs of children without parents in shelters or wherever they may have been located. The photographs then were circulated to television media for airing in the hope of generating calls, tips, and leads. Case analysis personnel in Alexandria, where NCMEC is housed, searched databases and looked for links and patterns in the leads received. Each child's case was assigned to a case manager, most of whom are former law enforcement professionals.

The results were staggering. Usually, the NCMEC Web site handles 1 million "hits" per day. That number grew to 20 million per day during the Katrina effort and stayed at that level for weeks. When the media started airing the photographs and information 24 hours per day, NCMEC linked their 2 hotlines to be certain that every call would be answered whenever it came in regardless of whether the "correct" number had been called. In addition, if one of the lines was busy, it would roll over to the other. After a little more than 1 month, the call volume finally began to drop, and the 2 lines were able to be consolidated. However, both numbers were maintained and still are being used for reports and leads.

The media response to this crisis was overwhelming. CNN ran photographs of the children, descriptive information, the hotline number, and Web site address 24 hours per day during the peak period. CBS ran photographs and information on every newscast every day and on their major news programs, "60 Minutes," "48 Hours," and others. They even aired these bulletins on CBS Radio news. Fox ran regular features, and NCMEC worked closely with "America's Most Wanted," which is hosted by NCMEC co-founder, John Walsh. NBC and MSNBC ran regular features. The media became a full partner in the effort to bring these families back together.

The response from corporate America was equally impressive. The many offers of in-kind assistance included:

- Canon provided digital cameras for Team Adam to use in the field.
- Nextel/Sprint provided telephones for Team Adam.
- FedEx Kinko's allowed families to use their facilities to scan or take photographs to transmit to the NCMEC.
- The National Association of Broadcasters provided portable television/radios for Team Adam along with some extras for distribution to families.
- American Airlines provided flights for 89 reunifications.
- Amtrak provided train tickets for reunification.
- Greyhound provided bus tickets for reunification.
- Angel Flight provided flights for reunification.
- Lifetouch provided school photographs of children, if available.
- ChoicePoint provided volunteers for the hotline and allowed use of their databases in the search.
- Lexis-Nexis allowed the use of their databases for the search.
- SUN Microsystems brought new servers when volume escalated.

SEPTEMBER THROUGH DECEMBER: 0 TO 3 MONTHS AFTER LANDFALL

The Katrina Missing Persons Hotline went live on September 5, 2005 (Labor Day). Through noon, December 7, 32 716 calls were handled, with 4909 reports of children missing or dislocated as a result of Hurricane Katrina and 102 children missing or dislocated as a result of Hurricane Rita (5011 total). By Christmas, 4371 children had been found and reunited with their families (87% of the total).

This still left 740 children who had not been reunited with their searching relatives. Fortunately, NCMEC since has been able to identify and reunite every unaccompanied child in the shelters. Thus, there are no more lone children for whom there are searches for parents or guardians.

It seems likely that the remainder of those who still are not accounted for is not the usual "missing child" for whom the whereabouts are truly not known. They are better described as examples of "fractured families" in which the children are with one parent or other close relatives but there still is a parent or guardian who has not been reunited with his or her family.

It also is suspected that a small number of these children did not survive the storm. The Justice Department also asked NCMEC to assist with their forensic imaging technology and specialists to help identify unidentified bodies at the appropriate time. Forensic artists routinely do facial reconstructions from skeletal remains or morgue photographs of unidentified deceased children.

MARCH 17, 2006: 6 MONTHS AFTER LANDFALL

This article was written in December 2005. Since that time, the search for the 5192 missing and dislocated children from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita has continued. On March 17, 2006, the final child was reunited with her family, meaning that all 5192 cases have been resolved.

COMMENTS

An important question is "How did so many of these families become separated?" "How were so many children left alone?" Many parents made a fundamental decision: "save my children first." When there were limited seats on the rescue helicopters or boats, the children went into those seats. When there was a crush of humanity trying to get on the buses at the Louisiana Superdome or the New Orleans Convention Center and parents were concerned about whether they actually would ever get out, in story after story, the parents pushed their children to the front of the lines and onto the buses first. There was trust that somehow this all would be sorted out later, but that fundamental parental instinct, child protection, came into play time and again.

Dealing with dislocated, fractured families in the

wake of a national catastrophe, while related, is nonetheless a different kind of challenge for NCMEC. Reconfiguring the training center as a hotline on very short notice worked in this case but would have worked better if a basic infrastructure had been in place. NCMEC is planning to create a parallel but multipurpose hotline/call-center facility. This facility will not sit idle as we wait for the next storm or disaster; it will be multiuse and become an integral part of what they do every day. Thus, it will not be necessary to create an infrastructure quite so hastily after the next crisis.

Finally, NCMEC has tried to use this opportunity to communicate directly to America's families. We live in a time in which families are separated and disjointed every day. Moms, dads, and kids head in different directions every morning, sometimes not quite getting back together. This happens for many reasons, including economic necessity. Families are advised to have a family emergency plan and know where to go and how to reconnect in case a disaster of any kind occurs. Parents are encouraged to have current photographs of their children on their person at all times and that children have some sort of ID with key descriptive information and preferably a photograph. In the old days, parents used to write down a small child's name and address on a piece of paper and put it in their shoe. In the 21st century, we can do better than that, but the basic commonsense of this old-fashioned idea has never been more evident.

Pediatricians should discuss these issues with parents as a part of health maintenance, and they can refer to the recent American Academy of Pediatrics statement on missing children for guidance.¹ Some key recommendations that relate to the Hurricane Katrina disaster are:

- Assist parents and children in putting the risk of becoming missing in proper perspective.
- Encourage families to teach children self-identifying information without connecting it to a threat of becoming missing.
- Encourage families to keep high-quality photographs of their children and keep them in a place that is readily accessible in an emergency and is safe from the elements so it will not be lost in a storm, etc.
- Tell parents (or shelter officials) to contact law enforcement immediately if a child becomes separated from his or her parents or guardians.
- Know about the NCMEC Web site (www.missingkids.com) and hotline (800-843-5678) and encourage parents to use them if their children become missing.
- Look at and encourage others to look at photographs of missing children and call if a child is recognized.

CONCLUSIONS

The challenge of bringing families back together in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was overwhelming, but NMEC can be proud of its role and demonstrated ability to reunite moms and dads with their children after the storm. Hopefully, when the next disaster occurs, fewer children will be separated from their families and those that are separated are reunited with their families even more quickly.

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