A federal advisory panel is looking to develop a national clearinghouse for information on caring for the unique needs of children during catastrophes.

The National Commission on Children and Disasters held a meeting earlier this month to hear about how first responders share information on the techniques they use on the job.

Congress asked the commission to determine whether an information-sharing database would benefit children’s emergency services professionals, commission Executive Director Christopher Revere said.

The panel decided it would, Revere said, adding, “What we’re trying to determine at this point is whether or not there is an existing platform for that information to be put together and placed on, or whether that platform needs to be created.”

The issue is important to those who provide services to children and families during disasters, the commissioners say. Although children comprise about a quarter of the population, there hasn’t been a lot of comprehensive planning for their care during large-scale emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina and the recent earthquake in Haiti.

Too often, officials say, emergency services to children, such as pediatric emergency care, food and shelter arrangements and equipment, schooling, and assistance to parents or other caregivers, are lost in the generalized effort to provide emergency services for special-needs populations.

A national database to harness the collective wisdom of the diverse groups involved in caring for children — from pediatricians to nongovernmental aid workers — could go a long way to elevating children’s services in national disaster-management plans, commissioners said.

But creating such a clearinghouse for information raises the kinds of concerns over privacy and the release of sensitive information that the Intelligence and Homeland Security communities have struggled over since their missions were expanded following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

At the Feb. 2 public meeting, a Federal Emergency Management Agency contractor told commissioners about how federal, state and local officials share first-response information. FEMA has created an online information-sharing tool called the Lessons Learned Information Sharing database, or LLIS, which allows emergency-response and homeland security workers from 26 disciplines to post and receive secure information on their various activities.

The idea started as a way for local emergency management officials to share response information following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, said Sonya Hsieh of BAE Systems, the company that administers the LLIS Web site. Since the federal government took up the model in 2004, the government has expanded its database beyond counterterrorism to include emergency services information writ large.

Today, the site has become a one-stop shop for information on everything from responding to pandemic flu to successful methods of interoperable communication, and from planning for mass evacuations to conducting large-scale training exercises.
The portal library holds nearly 143,000 documents organized by topic, including professional guidelines, state and local emergency plans, and “after-action” reports by emergency officials on their first-response activities, Hsieh said. The library also includes professionally vetted, original research, kept concise for relatively quick reading.

Each professional group research information across disciplines, she said, but they also have their own specific areas, or “channels,” where they submit information, access member forums, and post responses on message boards to those hard-to-answer questions.

Membership is free to emergency response professionals, Hsieh said. Since the network was created in 2004, more than 53,000 members have joined, nearly 90 percent of them from state and local agencies. The rest are federal and private-sector officials.

After hearing Hsieh’s presentation, Revere said the site serves as a good example of what a Web site can do to bring a diverse amount of information together. But it requires investment: According to FEMA, the LLIS site required $1.5 million to launch and costs $3.5 million to run annually, Revere said.

“Ultimately, I don’t know if we’re going to find the perfect, because to create the perfect will require a significant investment in federal dollars,” he said.

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