

Issue Brief



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PROTECTING CHILDREN DURING U.S. EMERGENCIES

How safe are our schools and day-care centers when disaster strikes?

Some 67 million children are enrolled in U.S. kindergartens, schools and child-care centers. Many parents assume these facilities are fully equipped to safeguard their children. However, for millions of parents this confidence may be misplaced.

New research commissioned by Save the Children has found that most states have not taken the necessary steps to ensure that thousands of child-care facilities are prepared to respond to the needs of children in the event of emergencies such as tornados, earthquakes or industrial accidents, which can strike during school hours. The research — the result of an April 2008 review of state child-care licensing regulations and quality standards conducted by Mississippi State University Early Childhood Institute — also examined state standards for K-12 schools and found that 18 states do not require K-12 schools to have written procedures for general disaster planning.

More American children than ever before are in out-of-home care each day. Over 11 million children in the United States under the age of 5 are in some type of child-care arrangement while their parents work. Meanwhile more than 90 percent of the nation's children up to 18 years of age, and over 88 percent of low-income children, live in counties at high risk of hurricanes, earthquakes or tornados.

Upon evaluation of emergency preparedness regulations and requirements for licensed child-care facilities and K-12 schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, the survey found that many states are falling short when it comes to protecting children in times of disaster.

In fact:

- Only nine states require licensed child-care facilities to have a designated relocation site and evacuation route in the event of

a disaster. When a child-care facility does not have a relocation site or evacuation route, neither staff nor children evacuating a building know where to go or the most direct route to safety. This absence of planning and practice may create confusion and panic during times of crisis. In the event of an unexpected disaster like a tornado, fire or chemical spill, minutes lost due to panic and confusion can have a profound impact on the safety of children and staff.

- Only 15 states require licensed child-care facilities to have a reunification plan for children and families in the event they become separated during an emergency. Children often spend a great deal of time in day-care facilities, and parents trust that if they need to reach their children, they know exactly where they are. If an emergency makes it impossible for a parent or caregiver to reach the day-care center, reunification plans ensure that parents can safely reunite with their young children and babies.

- Only 14 states require licensed child-care facilities to make provisions for children with special needs in case of a disaster. During emergencies all children are vulnerable; in the case of children with special needs, these vulnerabilities can be even more striking. If a child is confined to a wheelchair or has a sight or hearing impairment, a plan must be put into place to make sure they are cared for and not put in harm's way during an emergency.

- The review also found that 18 states do not require K-12 schools to have written procedures for general disaster planning. Without written procedures for disaster preparedness, any emergency response effort can falter due to variables such as staff changes, communication failures or misunderstandings about staff roles and responsibilities. Child safety requires that school disaster plans are written, easily available, practiced often and consistently improved.

See chart on the last page.

A Challenge to States

Save the Children is issuing a challenge to states to review their standards for schools and child-care centers and take steps to ensure these facilities plan for the needs of children in emergencies. Next summer, Save the Children will issue a report card ranking states on their progress in implementing critical emergency preparedness measures.

Save the Children is urging states to meet the following minimum requirements for child care licensing:

- maintain written disaster plans that are coordinated with local emergency responders
- conduct evacuation drills in conjunction with local communities
- designate relocation sites and routes to those sites
- develop reunification plans for children and families
- develop written procedures to provide for children with special needs

States should also require K-12 schools to have written emergency procedures, coordinated with local emergency responders, on file with the state.



MISSISSIPPI

Virginia and Nevada: Ahead of the Curve

In Save the Children's nationwide evaluation, two states stood out for requiring higher standards to keep children safe in the event of an emergency. Virginia's and Nevada's licensed child-care facilities are required to have clear procedures for an organized and effective response in the event of a disaster. These procedures apply to all children, including those with special needs. The centers regularly practice evacuations, so staff and children alike know how to reach safety together. They must draft reunification plans so children are not separated from their families. If a child or young person is attending a school in Virginia or Nevada, parents can take confidence in the fact that K-12 schools are required to have written procedures covering emergency preparedness for general emergencies and for area-specific potential hazards, as defined by the state.

Child-Care Emergency Planning: Economic Impact

When child-care facilities fail to plan for emergencies, local economies feel the impact.

Child-care centers are not eligible for immediate federal disaster recovery funding. Without a business-continuity plan or funds set aside to pay for building repairs and replacement of lost supplies, a disaster can force centers to shut their doors permanently, leaving families without care for their young children and no way to return to work.

In fact, nearly three years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, only 41 percent of New Orleans' child-care facilities have reopened, further hampering the city's workforce, businesses and efforts to convince families to move back to New Orleans.

Investments in the recovery of child care pay off for local economies. In fact, Cornell University researchers have found that for each dollar of new spending on child care, an additional 91 cents is generated in the regional economy. (More information available at: http://www.savethechildren.org/publications/issue-briefs/issuebrief3_07.pdf).

Working to Make Child Safety a Priority

Even smaller-scale disasters can cripple a local child-care industry. Save the Children has found that in eastern Iowa alone, recent flooding caused major

damage to a minimum of 48 facilities serving 1,250 children. The agency is working to raise funds to help these centers reopen and is supporting the Emergency Child Care Services Act (H.R. 2479), which would allow federal relief funds to be used to support emergency child-care services.

Furthermore, Save the Children is advocating for the federal government to amend the Stafford Act to make child-care facilities eligible for federal

emergency recovery funds to rebuild permanent child care infrastructure. Save the Children is committed to helping communities and policy makers meet these goals. As chair of the recently convened National Commission on Children in Disasters, Mark Shriver, head of Save the Children's U.S. Programs, will be advising federal, state and local governments on how to incorporate children's unique needs into emergency plans and response efforts.

Tulsa, Oklahoma: A Model for Change at the Community Level

Though leadership for emergency preparedness standards is extremely effective at the state level, change also can originate locally. Some communities, like Tulsa, Okla., are taking the lead in planning for children's needs in the event of an emergency. Last year a Tulsa Partners / Save the Children communitywide disaster-preparedness initiative brought together more than 60 local groups, including child-care centers, schools, neighborhood groups and emergency managers to take steps to ensure children's needs are a priority in local emergency planning and response efforts. The initiative included emergency preparedness and business continuity training for child-care centers, children's disaster preparedness workshops and the drafting of a children's annex, which was adopted as a key component of the Tulsa emergency operations plan.

Dr. Debbi Guilfoyle, director of Tulsa's Crosstown Learning Center, has seen how important emergency planning can be. When an explosion occurred at the Air-gas plant in 2003 just a few blocks from her child-care center, Dr. Guilfoyle acted immediately to protect the children in her care based on a plan she had developed. "We knew how to contact the parents and the procedures to ensure our children's safety, all because of preparedness, planning, training and practice."

Thanks to the Tulsa Partners / Save the Children initiative, Crosstown Learning Center also now has a business continuity plan in place to ensure the center can reopen as soon as possible after a tornado or other disaster.

States	Day-Care Center Standards			School Standards
	Designated Relocation Site and Evacuation Route	Reunification Plan for Children if Separated from Parents	Plan Addresses Special Needs of Children in Child Care	Written Procedure for General Disaster Planning
Nevada				
Utah				
Virginia				
Washington				
California				
Colorado				
Maryland				
Ohio				
Oregon				
Alaska				
Connecticut				
Iowa				
Massachusetts				
Mississippi				
New Jersey				
New York				
Pennsylvania				
Tennessee				
Vermont				
Arizona				
Delaware				
D.C.				
Florida				
Georgia				
Idaho				
Illinois				
Indiana				
Maine				
Minnesota				
Missouri				
New Mexico				
North Carolina				
Oklahoma				
Rhode Island				
South Carolina				
South Dakota				
Texas				
Wyoming				
Alabama				
Arkansas				
Hawaii				
Kansas				
Kentucky				
Louisiana				
Michigan				
Montana				
Nebraska				
New Hampshire				
North Dakota				
West Virginia				
Wisconsin				

Color key:

- States that meet all four requirements.
- States that meet three requirements.
- States that meet two requirements.
- States that meet one requirement.
- States that have no requirements.