

**Written Statement to the  
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee**

**Roundtable Discussion  
Hurricane Katrina: Rebuilding Lives and Communities**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Senate HELP Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today, and for your leadership in bringing us together to discuss the needs facing our fellow citizens displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Save the Children began serving children in the United States in 1932 in response to the Great Depression. That was the last time Americans saw so many people displaced because of a natural disaster when drought forced several hundred thousand people out of the Great Plains which had become “the Dust Bowl.”

Today, Save the Children is recognized as a leading independent child-assistance agency creating real and lasting change for children in need in 12 states and in more than 40 developing countries. Save the Children is a global leader in child-focused emergency response and has been designing innovative community-based psychosocial support programs in crisis-affected countries for over 20 years, including most recently in response to the tsunami crisis in Asia.

Hurricane Katrina is one of the worst natural disasters in U.S. history. We know that there are critical needs for those displaced by Hurricane Katrina that still must be met: clean water, food, shelter, medicine and clothing. Children are among the most vulnerable in this situation, and their needs are often overlooked or misunderstood. As families are settled in new communities and children enrolled in schools, we know there will be an urgent challenge to provide support to the tens of thousands of children who have experienced the horrors of the disaster and are now without their homes, neighborhoods, routines, schools and in some cases families.

Save the Children has been in touch with state officials in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas and yesterday a small team left to assess the situation on the ground in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and one will be heading to Jackson, Mississippi early next week. While we will continue to refine our response based on these ongoing discussions and assessments, Save the Children, based on years of experience dealing with the needs of children caught in man-made conflicts and natural disasters, has identified 3 needs for children impacted by Hurricane Katrina: psychosocial support, safe spaces for children, especially those of pre-school age, and structured out-of-school time activities for children in grades K-8.

## Psychosocial Support through Schools

Once basic needs are met, it will be paramount to prevent the onset of psychological disorder, anti-social behavior and school-related learning problems that often affected children and adolescents in the aftermath of traumatic events, especially when their psychological needs are left unattended. Traditional mental health clinics and counseling approaches are not sufficient. Community mental health approaches are required if large numbers of children are to be reached in a timely manner in order to:

- Reduce the risk of depression, antisocial and other dysfunctional behaviors.
- Reestablish a sense of security and self-esteem.
- Facilitate resiliency and a return to normalcy.
- Use schools and other natural learning environments to decentralize mental health services.
- Screen for high-risk children and youth.

An immediate- and short-term response to a sudden event can mitigate the impact of exposure and the potential onset of mood and anxiety disorders. Survivors – including children -- of stressful events have the strength to express what has happened to them, when given the proper tools, a supportive environment and structured activities. For children, these can be dance, music, drawing, cooperative games, and other activities that enable them to explore basic emotions such as fear, loss, sadness, joy and courage while at the same time having fun with classmates and friends.

Entire classrooms, rather than individual “victims,” are selected for participation. Teachers (or school counselors) are trained to lead these highly structured activities.

By implementing structured activities program as a part of a school’s curriculum, not only can large numbers of children in need be reached quickly, but the potential stigma of receiving mental health support also is reduced.

Evaluations of the impact of Save the Children’s program on children in crisis after a devastating earthquake in Turkey, conflicts in Nepal and the West Bank and Gaza and the tsunami in Indonesia found significant improvements in their attitudes and behavior, including:

- Fewer traumatic stress symptoms, such as nightmares, bed-wetting and emotional numbing.
- Improved concentration.
- Improved academic performance.
- Improved school attendance.
- Elimination of withdrawn and antisocial behavior.
- Improved relations between teachers and students.
- Improved relations between students in the group.
- Increased self-esteem and sense of stability.

**Save the Children recommends that Congress provides funding for schools serving displaced children for:**

- (1) Implementation of child-focused mental health strategies and psychosocial support programs for children and youth affected by Hurricane Katrina.**
- (2) Training and technical assistance related to psychological recovery and healing for children and adolescents and implementing psychosocial programs in schools and classrooms.**

### **Safe Spaces for Children/Pre-school Programming**

During the acute phase of a crisis, such as Hurricane Katrina, children are vulnerable due to separation from their families, displacement from their homes, the shock of their experiences and disruption of routines, especially schools, recreation centers, sports teams and clubs.

Moreover, these children are often left unattended as parents or caregivers, if they are not separated from them, seek life-saving support and attempt to rebuild their lives. From Save the Children's global experience with children in crisis, we have learned that communities know how to protect their children best, and they frequently prioritize the rapid establishment of safe places to play and learn for children while educational and recreational facilities are being rebuilt or restored.

One of Save the Children's innovations in crisis situations is the rapid, cost-efficient establishing of safe places for children to play, learn and recover their sense of routine and normalcy. Safe spaces have been provided for young children from such previous crises in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s through the crisis in south Asia for the surviving tsunami children and displaced children in Darfur, Sudan.

During the acute emergency of Hurricane Katrina, "Safe Spaces" should cover all ages of children. This could be done in shifts or simultaneously depending upon the community and children. During the acute phase, staff/volunteers would be briefed on child safety, trained in the organization of basic activities, psychosocial support for children, and systems of referral in regard to issues such as family separation and health.

From our experience, "Safe Spaces" normalize children's lives by providing regular structured activities, including recreational, educational and psychosocial activities. However, "Safe Spaces" also fill another void in child-focused emergency response: The needs of pre-school aged children are rarely served in emergencies. As primary and secondary school students return to school, Save the Children recommends transitioning "Safe Spaces" to serve the needs of pre-school children.

Early Childhood Development activities are important for both the child as well as the caregiver. Traumatized parents are often unable to provide sufficient care for younger children and the continuation of "Safe Spaces" would address this. Additionally, from experience, caregivers will need some form of daycare as they re-establish their lives. For Save the Children, daycare in such situations should be more than just child play but address their psychosocial needs, to prepare them for schooling and living in post-crisis environment.

Save the Children recommends that Congress:

- (1) Makes a priority the rapid creation of “Safe Spaces” in temporary shelters and the training of “Safe Space” staff/volunteers to address the needs of the children and allows the use of funds under grants given for the for support of temporary and long-term shelters.**
- (2) Provides additional funding for training and technical assistance for Early Head Start and Head Start Centers serving displaced children and children affected by Hurricane Katrina to address the children’s psychosocial needs.**
- (3) Provides funding to communities as they rebuild and re-establish needed services for children, such as daycare facilities, youth centers and gyms, through the provision of materials and training.**

### **Structured Out-of-School-Time Programs for Children in Grades K-8**

Save the Children provides after-school programs for children living in some of the most remote rural regions of the United States – including several in the Mississippi River Delta region, not far from the worst of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation. As a result of Hurricane Katrina, large numbers of school-age children have been uprooted and displaced. Many are homeless and will have less time in school and fewer opportunities for quality structured academic and recreational activities. Some will remain in temporary housing for many months, and even those who are able to attend schools in Texas, Tennessee and other states will require special support because of the disaster they have survived and the unfamiliar locations in which they find themselves.

The families and schools to whom these children have turned also will need training and support in order to provide the extra academic, recreational and nurturing opportunities that these children will need to help to bring normalcy back into their lives and restore their emotional well-being and sense of security. We are already hearing that many districts will be overcrowded and have to adopt a “split session” for the school day. Children will be left with substantial idle time on their hands before and after school. Filling that time with academic and recreational activities that support their school achievement as well as emotional recovery is a critical need.

Children who participate in after school programs demonstrate better school attendance, more positive attitude towards school work, better interpersonal skills, reduced dropout rates, less time spent in unhealthy behaviors, and improved grades. All of these results in and of themselves are positive, but put in the context of the hurricane victims take on the added benefit of helping restore a sense of routine and stability.

**Save the Children recommends that Congress provides:**

- (1) Additional funding to create more 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers in communities serving large numbers of children displaced by Hurricane Katrina.**
- (2) Provide training and technical assistance in psychosocial support to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers and other entities supporting the educational and recreational needs of displaced children.**

### **Conclusion**

Save the Children stands ready to make its experts and experience in child-focused community mental health strategies, available to federal, state and local authorities to advise on both an overall approach to psychological recovery and healing for children and adolescents, and on implementing psychosocial, “Safe Space,” pre-school and out-of-school time programs for children displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

The urgent needs of children victimized by Hurricane Katrina must remain at the forefront of our nation’s response to this unprecedented natural disaster. We know from experience that the minds and hearts of children are very resilient, but they must be attended to quickly. A return to normalcy and routine with activities designed to help them deal with their trauma will help enormously. It will take years to rebuild damaged homes, businesses and infrastructure. We won’t have to wait that long to see results in making our children whole again if we act swiftly and give them the right support.