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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and members of the Committee, I am Jeanne-Aimee De Marrais, the Senior Director of U.S. Emergencies at Save the Children. Since 2005, I have led the organization's response to every natural and man-made disaster in the U.S. since Hurricane Katrina. I also have served on the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Advisory Council from since 2014. On behalf of Save the Children, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the lessons learned following the three major hurricanes that hit the United States in 2017.

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Save the Children is the national leader for child-focused disaster preparedness, response and recovery. We have responded to emergencies and humanitarian crises around the world for nearly 100 years. Through our on-the-ground work in response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, and other disasters, we have identified critical gaps in states' and communities' capacities to protect children in emergencies. Save the Children seeks to work with Congress to ensure the unique



needs of children are addressed during the long road to recovery and to better equip states to respond to the next disaster.

Hurricanes Maria, Irma and Harvey created catastrophic damage and upended the lives of millions of children. Save the Children responded quickly to each of these major storms to provide relief to children and families in emergency shelters. Our response included child-friendly spaces, distribution of essential supplies for children and babies, and psychosocial support. Our ongoing response is now focused on recovery --- providing evidence-based programs that strengthen community outreach and assist with child care and school restoration recovery efforts. Save the Children is also providing psychosocial support (PSS) training and programs across program areas and building partnerships to support the PSS recovery phase. Our focus is to serve the most marginalized children and families in these communities.

Experts estimate the Puerto Rico recovery process will take 10 years, longer than the recovery process after Hurricane Katrina. Six months post-hurricane, at least 15 percent of the island remains without power, and frequent brown-outs impact as much as 50 percent of the island.

Nearly one in three schools lacks electricity and many also lack consistent access to clean, potable water. This has forced many schools to operate on a limited daily schedule from 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. This has led to school-age children in Puerto Rico missing out on many hundreds of hours of learning. Not only are



Puerto Rican students falling behind their peers academically, but they lack the daily routine school brings, which is critical for emotional recovery. While the visible damage to structures, outdoor spaces and recreational equipment are a constant reminder of the physical devastation of the hurricane, children and families continue to have invisible scars from emotional and mental stress. Many children urgently need psychological and emotional support.

Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria forced children into incredibly stressful situations – evacuations, unfamiliar emergency shelters, and the loss of homes, possessions and routines. Families arrived at shelters with little or no supplies for hygiene or infant care. Child care and early childhood development programs and schools were closed or damaged, leaving children and families without these critical services. The storms may also impact children’s long-term emotional, mental health and psychosocial well-being. If not addressed, this can have a detrimental effect on their behavior and school performance and affect a family for generations.

Following Hurricane Katrina, the presidentially-appointed National Commission on Children and Disasters was formed, chaired by Save the Children. The Commission released its final report in 2010 documenting 81 recommendations to improve outcomes for children across 11 emergency planning functions (including mass care, disaster case management, health, schools, child care,



housing, evacuation and reunification, and recovery).<sup>1,2</sup> From 2008-2015, Save the Children issued a *National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters* measuring the nation's progress against the National Commission's recommendations.<sup>3</sup> The 2015 report found that 79 percent of these recommendations remained unfilled more than a decade after Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, large gaps remain in preparation for family reunification, protection in mass care settings, coordinating with child-serving institutions, and providing immediate and long-term psychosocial/mental health and pediatric support.

Much work remains to be done to ensure children are protected when crisis strikes. We wanted to focus on four areas today that Congress could do to help children as they recover from these three devastating hurricanes.

### **Education Recovery – Return to Learning**

Each year disasters have a major impact on children, youth and education systems. Big or small, these result in children missing school days, absenteeism by teachers who themselves may be affected by the disasters, disruption of education cycles, school closure because of damage and destruction to school infrastructure, or repeated or prolonged use of schools as emergency shelters. For disaster-prone areas, this can mean that every year children are losing many

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<sup>1</sup> National Commission on Children and Disasters. 2010 Report to the President and Congress. AHRQ Publication No. 10-M037. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. (2010).

<sup>2</sup> <https://archive.ahrq.gov/prep/nccdreport/nccdreport.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Save The Children. Still At Risk: U.S. Children 10 Years After Hurricane Katrina 2015 National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters. Fairfield, CT: Save The Children. (2015).



precious student-teacher contact hours, which severely impacts educational outcomes and a child's overall development.

Additionally, when children have safe spaces to learn and play, and can access a full range of services and support, they are less vulnerable to the increased risks that go hand-in-hand with disasters. Schools can also provide children with the space they need to access psychological support and assist with regaining a sense of normality and healing from trauma.

There are significant gaps in information from the education sector on both the short- and long-term impacts disasters have on education. A lack of official data collection and analysis of the number of children and schools affected by disasters inhibits coordination between response agencies, government bodies and community organizations, and impacts the effectiveness of the education response as a whole.

**Congressional Recommendation:** Ensure that no displaced child is out of an educational setting for more than 30 days. Congress must enact policies with a commitment that no child misses more than a month of school, post disaster. A return to learning policy framework should include: assessing the number children out of school, number of learning spaces needed, limiting the use of schools as temporary shelters, expediting the rehabilitation and refurbishment of damaged schools, establishing temporary learning spaces and providing alternative education delivery programs (such as education in shelters or



additional funding for afterschool programming). Congress should create a permanent funding mechanism to support recovery for schools and students to ensure that school systems recovering from disasters are provided immediate resources to reopen and restore the learning environment in a timely manner and provide support for displaced students and their host schools.

We also urge Congress to call for an investigation and documentation of the short- and long-term impacts of disasters on schools. Such a study can identify policy, implementation, data and knowledge gaps that will provide an evidence base to inform program and advocacy strategies, as well as seek to put more comprehensive numbers behind the stories of the impacts of disasters.

### **Child Care Recovery**

Currently, private, for-profit childcare programs, which comprise the majority of childcare programs in the U.S., are ineligible for FEMA recovery funding. Extensive research has shown that childcare services are essential to the economic health and vitality of a community.<sup>4</sup> During a disaster, workers with young children cannot resume their jobs unless there is safe, secure childcare for their children. Due to limited funding opportunities for private childcare programs, most

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mildredwarner.org/econdev/child-care>



facilities that are damaged or destroyed in a disaster receive little to no federal recovery support.

**Congressional Recommendation:** Congress should amend the Stafford Act to make child care a critical service. This would place it in the same category as schools, which would alleviate the requirement for child care facilities to apply to for Small Business Administration (SBA) loans. Child care providers rarely receive SBA loans because their profit margin is so low. This has acted as a deterrent for many of these providers to even apply. In addition, we urge Congress to authorize a grant funding mechanism, such as an emergency contingency fund, to repair or rebuild private, for-profit child care facilities, support the establishment of temporary child care, and reimburse states for subsidizing child care services to disaster-affected families.

### **Mental Health Needs**

Natural and man-made disasters frequently have widespread, deep and enduring impacts on children's mental health. Most children experience long-term reactions to a disaster. Therefore, it is important that adults who care for children at schools and childcare facilities are trained to provide supportive services after a



major disaster, rather than relying exclusively on the traditional clinical approach of triage and referral.

**Congressional Recommendation:** Congress and the Department of Education should award funds to States to implement and evaluate training and professional development programs train teachers on how to provide support to grieving students and students in crisis. States should also be encouraged to establish requirements related to teacher certification and recertification. In addition, Congress should adequately fund the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative (NCTSI) and Project SERV state grants to provide trauma treatment, programming and services in schools and communities for children, youth and families who experience or witness traumatic events.

### **Government Funding & Accountability**

The biggest obstacle to supporting children through disaster response is inadequate funding. Robust funding and strong accountability structures are required to meet the needs of children. While the U.S. invests billions of dollars to support emergency preparedness and response, very often children's needs are overlooked. In fact, of every \$10 in federal emergency preparedness grants, less than one cent has gone toward activities targeting children's safety.





**Congressional Recommendation:** Congress, through the appropriations process, has the responsibility to fund the federal government in such a way as to meet the needs of children. We need to dedicate more funding to emergency preparedness, response and recovery to lessen the gaps that remain and further support children.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony on our work responding to these disasters and look forward to working with the members of the Committee to ensure that children and families receive the support they need to recover from disasters.