



Testimony by Kathy Spangler, Vice President, U.S. Programs, Save the Children, September 19, 2013
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response and Communications

UNACCEPTABLE: Despite a record disaster year and high-profile school tragedies, most states still fail to meet basic child-safety measures

Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, and esteemed Members of the Homeland Security Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this critical issue. You ask whether our government is doing enough to protect children when disaster strikes? Put quite simply, *we are not*. This is unacceptable.

This past year showed our country how disaster can strike anywhere at any time and how vulnerable our children can be. 2012 was the second costliest year of U.S. disaster destruction on record. Thousands of families were uprooted. The devastation left by **Hurricanes Sandy** and **Isaac** in New York, New Jersey and the Gulf coast, the **Oklahoma tornadoes**, and the tragedy at **Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut** should be a wake-up call. But when it comes to taking very basic measures to protect our children from disaster, too many states won't budge. It's like they're stuck in a pre-Katrina world where the gaps weren't so clear.

Do you know how long it took to reunite the last child with her family after Hurricane Katrina? Six months. And yet eight years later, many states are still falling short when it comes to family reunification planning.

Any given work day, 68 million children are separated from their families. Where are these children? In schools and child care. Children need protections where they are, and it's the government's obligation to make sure that happens.

After Katrina, Congress authorized the ***National Commission on Children and Disasters*** led by Save the Children and it recommended hundreds of steps that should be taken to protect children. We condensed many of those recommendations into just four minimum standards. And for six years we have released a Disaster Report Card on how states are doing.

The four standards are: that states must require all **child care centers** to have (1) an evacuation and relocation plan, (2) a family reunification plan, and (3) a plan for children with special needs, and (4) that states require all K-12 **schools** to have disaster plans that account for multiple types of hazards. Last week, we released our 2013 report, ***Unaccounted For: A National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters*** (www.savethechildren.org/get-ready) and the results were astonishing.

- 28 States plus the District of Columbia still fail to meet minimum standards on protecting children in schools and child care.

- 6 States and the District of Columbia still fail to require multi-hazard plans for all schools.
- Since 2008, the number of states meeting all four standards has risen from 4 to only 22.

Fortunately, there are some bright spots. This year, four states including New Jersey, Tennessee, Nebraska and Utah all took steps to meet all four standards. Furthermore, the Federal Government appears to be advancing efforts to address these gaps.

The **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**, Administration on Children and Families, has proposed a new rule obligating child care providers that receive subsidies through the **Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG)** to verify that they have an emergency plan with 2 of our 3 critical provisions, and we are hopeful that HHS will amend that rule to include all three.

Today, we are pleased to congratulate Ranking Member Payne, Jr. and Ranking Member Thompson. On this very Committee for introducing legislation today that takes this same approach to motivate state action on the 4th standard—to better protect children in schools. Their legislation, called the **“S.A.F.E. Schools Act”** would require each state applying for the **State Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP)** through the **Department of Homeland Security (DHS)** to certify that it already requires its schools to have multi-hazard emergency plans (or that it will do so by the start of the 2015 academic year). This would be the tipping point we need to better protect our children!

If ever there was a year when we saw the variety of emergencies that can occur in states this year was it. From fires to floods to tornadoes to hurricanes to man-made disasters; we saw first-hand that at a very minimum, schools and child care centers must have emergency plans that require them to consider and practice each. Just imagine how different it is to practice moving all children out into a parking lot in a fire drill, versus moving them all into a safe room for a tornado, much less practicing a lock-down for a shooting situation. We must require multi-hazard plans. And this act is a critical first step. I encourage you all to co-sponsor this legislation and encourage your colleagues to do the same.

This is the first of three recommendations we offer today. Because there is more the Congress can do to protect our children.

From Sandy to Sandy Hook, Isaac to Oklahoma, Save the Children was on the ground during the major disasters of the past year. We provided child-friendly services in shelters, mental health programs for parents and kids, and recovery funding for child care providers and schools. As the leading child-focused emergency response organization, we are seeing many critical gaps in protecting children.

One of the most startling is how child care centers are often left behind when it comes to emergency response and recovery. After the Oklahoma tornadoes, we helped damaged and destroyed child care centers that have little access to emergency recovery funds reopen. Their services were desperately needed by families of children who experienced the most terrifying experience of their young lives, and many of whom lost homes or even neighbors.

One director told us how as parents and staff pulled children from the rubble of her destroyed center that day, first responders raced down the street, right past them to a nearby destroyed hospital.

Nobody stopped to help them because nobody even knew a child care center, infants and young children were even there.

Our second recommendation is that the Congress encourages states to map the locations of all child care centers so this never happens again. It can do so by making child care mapping eligible for block grant eligibility.

Finally, we need to encourage protecting children and accounting for their unique needs across all our nation's emergency planning efforts. Save the Children believes a good start is showing just how much or little the states are doing for children with the federal funds they receive. Unfortunately, it is very, very little.

A measure we were able to successfully advocate be included in the FY 2012 budget process required for the first time that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) detail how much of their annual grant funds are dedicated towards the needs of children. FEMA's resulting report showed that only 16 of the states dedicated a total of less than \$10 million to protecting children out of billions of dollars worth of emergency preparedness grants between 2004-2010.

Our third recommendation is that instead of fighting to include this required reporting in the budget every year, the Congress require such reporting in authorizing legislation. Once we shed light on how little is being done to protect the most vulnerable among us – our children—we can encourage states to rectify this shameful oversight.

To recap, our three recommendations are:

- (1) Pass the **"SAFE Schools Act"** in order to utilize the State Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) to ask states to require multi-hazard emergency plans for schools
- (2) Recommend block grant eligibility for **child care mapping**
- (3) Require **FEMA to report the percentage of grants going children's needs**

Congress has the power to act now to protect children before the next disaster strikes. We urge you to do so.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today, and welcome any questions you may have.