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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

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Congressional Committees

Subject: *Lessons Learned for Protecting and Educating Children after the Gulf Coast Hurricanes*

In August and September 2005, thousands of children were displaced from their homes as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Questions were raised about their safety and the services provided to the most vulnerable children affected by the hurricanes: unaccompanied minors and children in foster care. In addition, thousands of school-aged children requiring educational services were displaced from their schools.

In view of these circumstances, we conducted work under the Comptroller General's authority to learn more about the challenges encountered and lessons learned in:

- (1) locating missing children;
- (2) locating and serving Louisiana's displaced foster children; and
- (3) reopening K-12 schools and educating displaced school-aged children.

In February 2006, we offered or provided briefings to the staffs of your committees on our preliminary observations. Enclosed is a briefing summary.

During the course of our work, officials from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education informed us that they are taking a number of steps to address the challenges that we identified, and we reflected those actions in our document, where appropriate. As a result, we are not making any recommendations at this time. We provided this document to officials from HHS, Education, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The officials generally agreed with our conclusions or provided technical comments that were incorporated into our document.

We are sending copies of this briefing to the cognizant congressional committees, HHS and Education. We will make copies available to others upon request. This briefing also will be available on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. Should you or your staff have any questions, please contact me at (202) 512-7215. Key contributors may be found on the last page of the briefing.

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*List of Committees*

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United States Senate

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Subcommittee on Human Resources  
Committee on Ways and Means  
House of Representatives

(130563)

Enclosure



# Preliminary Observations

## Why GAO Did This Study

In August and September 2005, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused devastating damage to states along the Gulf Coast. In the aftermath of the storms, many questions were raised about the status of the thousands of children living in the affected areas. We prepared this preliminary information under the Comptroller General’s authority to learn more about (1) the number of missing children and the challenges and lessons learned in locating them; (2) the number of foster and other children receiving child welfare services in Louisiana, in particular, who were affected by the storm, and the challenges and lessons learned in locating and serving them; and (3) the number of schoolchildren displaced by the storm, the damage to their schools, and the challenges and lessons learned for educating displaced school-aged children.

## Agency Comments

We provided this document to officials from the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Education, as well as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). The officials generally agreed with our conclusions or provided technical comments that were incorporated into our findings.

# Gulf Coast Hurricanes: Lessons Learned for Protecting and Educating Children

## Summary of Findings

Gulf Coast state and local officials and others throughout the country have worked hard to protect and support children affected by the hurricanes. However, a number of lessons learned from these hurricanes could improve future responses to catastrophic events and, in some cases, to other disasters as well.

- State and local disaster plans could better protect children if they integrated the needs of child welfare and education agencies. For example, schools can reopen more quickly when local relief officials work with school personnel to coordinate how resources will be allocated. With schools in operation, communities can focus on recovery. Moreover, child welfare and education agencies can better prepare for and respond to large-scale disasters by maintaining emergency contact information for staff and foster parents and developing evacuation instructions.
- Children could benefit from data-sharing agreements among organizations. Agreements to share data on displaced children and families could help speed efforts to locate them.
- Flexibility in certain federal reporting requirements can allow states and localities to focus more attention on recovery efforts.

## Background

Prior to the hurricanes:

- Relative to other states in the nation, the four affected states—Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas—had among the highest percentages of children in poverty based on 2000 data from the Census Bureau.
  - Mississippi 27.0%
  - Louisiana 26.6%
  - Alabama 21.5%
  - Texas 20.5%
- Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi students scored lower than the national average on the reading and math National Assessment of Educational Progress; Texas students scored about the same as the national average in reading and slightly higher in math.

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# Missing Children

## Facts on Missing Children

- After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, approximately 5,200 children were reported missing to NCMEC.
- All of the instances of children reported missing to NCMEC were resolved by March 2006.

## Lessons Learned

- Having an adequate number of trained staff present during a large-scale evacuation can help ensure that families are kept together. Child welfare workers in Louisiana were deployed to evacuation sites for Hurricane Rita to ensure that children were placed with their guardians.
- Standing agreements for data sharing among organizations tracking missing persons and the American Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) can help locate missing persons more quickly.
- Trained investigators and retired law enforcement officials can help locate missing children after disasters.

## Missing Children: Challenges

The reasons children were separated from their families are not fully understood, but in many cases children were evacuated separately from parents and were sent to different shelters. Because of NCMEC's staff of trained investigators, some of whom are retired law enforcement officers, with experience finding children at risk, the Department of Justice asked the organization to help reunite children and families. NCMEC faced some challenges, namely:

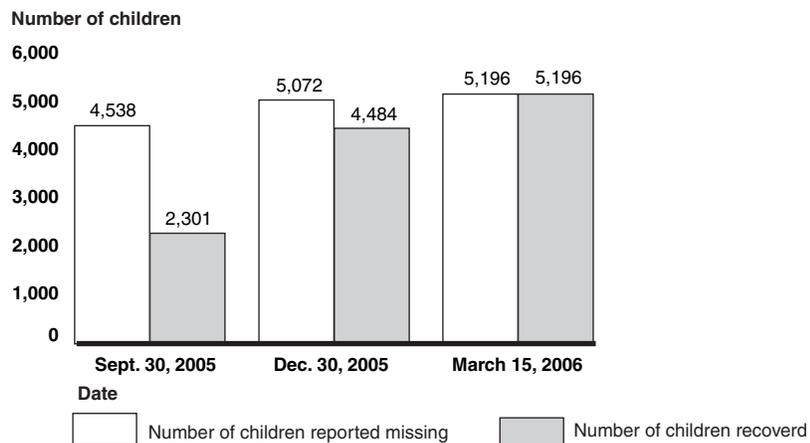
### Disaster Planning and Service Delivery

- NCMEC had to adapt its definition of *missing children* and who can report them missing. Previously only law enforcement agencies, parents, or legal guardians could report children missing. After the storm, the center accepted reports from *nonparents* of children displaced by the storm.
- Because of large call volumes, NCMEC added staff and phone lines to handle hurricane-specific calls.

### Data and Record Management

- Officials from NCMEC told us that both the American Red Cross and FEMA had information on the location of children in their databases, but it was difficult to obtain this information because of privacy concerns. NCMEC signed memorandums of understanding with both organizations, but the negotiations and review process to complete these memorandums slowed efforts to locate the children. The U.S. Postal Service made data available to NCMEC to help find missing children.
- All of the children reported missing were not necessarily unaccompanied or in harm's way. Because nonguardians, such as neighbors, could report a child as missing, some children who were safe with their families or other guardians were probably reported missing.

### Finding Missing Children after the Hurricanes



Source: The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

# Child Welfare

## Child Welfare in Louisiana

### Foster Children

- Of Louisiana's 5,000 foster children, close to 2,000 were displaced by Hurricane Katrina.
- Approximately 370 foster children were displaced from the state, and about 150 remained outside of Louisiana in 19 states as of April 2006.
- All foster children were located by November 2005.

### Other Child Welfare Services

- Prior to the hurricanes, approximately 1,885 families were under investigation for abuse and neglect, and 364 were receiving family services in the affected areas.
- After the hurricanes, Louisiana ran a shelter for 24 unaccompanied children.

### Staff

- As many as 900 employees from Louisiana's Department of Social Services (DSS) were diverted to set up and staff emergency shelters for over 5 weeks, reducing the time available to support child welfare services. As soon as the shelters began to empty and workers returned to full-time child welfare work, Hurricane Rita approached the state and called for another evacuation and staff to shelter duty.
- About 640 of the state's social workers were also initially displaced from the heavily affected communities, making it even more difficult to find displaced foster children.

## Child Welfare: Louisiana's Challenges

Louisiana child welfare officials faced a number of challenges in locating and serving displaced foster children and other children needing services or protection.

### Disaster Planning

Louisiana officials told us that the state's disaster plans did not anticipate such a large-scale event. Foster parents knew that they were required to contact their social workers when leaving the state, but phones were inoperable and social workers were also displaced. Social workers' phones were not always operational for weeks after the storm and could not relay the information to the state agency. The state publicized a toll-free hotline for foster parents to communicate with state officials. Officials relied on foster parents to call the toll-free number to report the location of the foster children and any special needs that they or their foster children may have needed. State officials were also able to send monthly foster payment checks to foster parents at their new location.

### Data and Record Management

- Louisiana officials also told us it was difficult to contact foster parents because their emergency contact information was limited and located in case records that were inaccessible for weeks following the storm. In addition, the state was in the process of creating a statewide child welfare information system but did not have extensive case information in a central database.
- In some localities, social workers recreated case files from memory and other documentation because close to 300 current case files had been destroyed and even more were inaccessible. As a result of limited access to child welfare case files and other disruptions, some court proceedings related to adoptions and reunifications had to be delayed.
- Louisiana officials told us that it was difficult to get information from the American Red Cross and FEMA on families they were unable to locate. Louisiana officials said they had to sign a memorandum of understanding with American Red Cross officials which stated that the agency would contact the Red Cross shelters prior to entering to search for foster children. Louisiana officials said that by the time the memorandum was approved, the American Red Cross had closed its shelters.

# Child Welfare

## Lessons Learned

- Future state disaster plans should include evacuation information and instructions for foster parents and social workers. Louisiana is in the process of conducting foster parent emergency preparedness courses. In addition, HHS is planning a conference focusing on disaster preparedness and recovery in which child welfare officials from the affected states can share lessons learned with officials from other states.
- Updated emergency contact information and automated case file systems could help locate and serve foster children more quickly.
- Standing agreements among state child welfare officials and the American Red Cross and FEMA on data sharing and coordination could expedite recovery efforts.

## Child Welfare: Louisiana's Challenges (cont.)

### Service Delivery

- *Foster children:* All out-of-state foster family cases are being managed by caseworkers in Louisiana with limited supervision provided by caseworkers in the host state. Many foster families who were living out of state faced problems finding providers to accept their Medicaid card for mental health services and medication. When it has needed to do so, Louisiana has contracted for services such as short-term caretakers for foster children to help displaced foster families. In addition, heightened levels of stress can increase the likelihood of abuse or neglect, which can increase the need for child protective services and foster parents. In some cases, foster parents were unable to cope with the effects of the storm and returned children to the child welfare agency.
- *Children receiving other child welfare services:* Many families were receiving services while their child was residing in their home, and other families were under investigation for abuse and neglect. State officials placed a priority on the cases of children determined to be at high risk of abuse and focused their initial effort on locating and serving these families. In cases where they were unable to find the families, officials requested and received assistance from NCMEC.

### Concerns over Federal Assistance

- State officials told us that they were concerned about how their future federal funding would be affected in the aftermath of the storm and whether additional funds would be made available to them to help with recovery efforts. For example, some funding elements are linked to goals in a program improvement plan (PIP) that they were unlikely to meet. State officials told us that HHS has addressed their concerns by renegotiating the PIP in light of the effects of the storms.
- State officials also requested from HHS a number of waivers for other statutory requirements for federal child welfare programs. HHS officials told us that they did not have the authority to grant the requested waivers for certain child welfare programs, but issued an information memorandum reminding states of the flexibilities that existed within some of the current program structure. In the aftermath of the hurricanes, HHS officials are working with the gulf coast states to assess the needs of the states and whether HHS may need additional waiver authority to respond to future events. In addition to its weekly conference calls with the states following Hurricane Katrina, HHS has provided additional funding to its sponsored resource centers to provide training and technical assistance to the states affected by the hurricanes.
- HHS officials told us they needed the state to provide frequent information on the status of children under its care. However, state officials told us that HHS's initial reporting and data requirements diverted time and attention from their more immediate needs.

# Education

## Facts on Education

### Displaced Students

- Thousands of students, from kindergarten to the 12th grade (K-12), were displaced by the hurricanes.
- Schools from nearly every state enrolled some of the more than 150,000 displaced K-12 students in fall 2005.
- The five states with the most displaced students were:
  - Louisiana (46,300),
  - Texas (45,200),
  - Mississippi (18,100),
  - Georgia (10,600), and
  - Alabama (7,100)
- The nationwide number of displaced students has fallen slightly since the fall of 2005.

### Damage to Facilities

- Louisiana officials said that 29 schools were destroyed, and about half of the state's schools were damaged.
- Mississippi officials said that 16 schools were destroyed, and over half of the state's districts reported some

## Lessons Learned

Disaster planning that addresses large-scale emergencies can speed the reopening of schools, which is vital for community recovery.

Using the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to enroll displaced students in new schools can ensure that these students' education continues.

Federal flexibility in reporting and other requirements would allow states and districts to focus on rebuilding.

## Education: Challenges for the Affected States

State and local education officials faced challenges in restarting schools and educating displaced students. We identified the following challenges:

**Disaster planning:** Some districts had crisis plans, but not for large-scale disasters in which the population did not immediately return home. In these districts, officials had difficulty locating employees, which was essential to reopening schools. School district officials needed to work closely with other local officials to focus resources on reopening schools.

**Service delivery:** States, with assistance from Education, required districts to immediately enroll displaced students through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Districts generally enrolled displaced students quickly under difficult circumstances. The large number of displaced students in some districts led to a strain on classroom space, books, teachers, school buses, bus drivers, and counseling services. Finding individuals with the expertise to help special-needs students was also difficult, especially in small districts.

**Data/records management:** Displaced students' records were often not immediately available to their new districts. As a result, districts often enrolled students based on information provided by parents about grade level, disability status, and other factors. Louisiana and Texas collaborated to eventually make displaced Louisiana students' records available to authorized Texas personnel. Mississippi student records, including academic records, were automated and made available to students' new districts.

**Financial difficulties:** Districts in areas directly affected by the storms and those that enrolled displaced students faced financial challenges, including providing services to additional students. As a result, Congress appropriated \$1.4 billion to help reopen elementary and secondary schools and serve displaced students. The first installment was made available to states in January 2006; Education plans to release the final installment in May 2006. Although grateful for assistance, state and local officials said that they would still bear a significant financial burden as a result of the storms.

- Property tax revenues, a key funding source for schools, will likely be undercut in areas with property damage. State funding for schools may also be undercut by the effects of the storms.
- State and local officials indicated that displaced students often require additional services, such as counseling and remediation.
- Federal assistance for displaced students under the Hurricane Education Recovery Act is available for 1 year only, yet state officials reported that a large number of displaced students are likely to remain in their new districts.

**Federal flexibility:** State and district officials expressed the need for flexibility in meeting the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLBA). Upon request of the affected states, Education quickly granted some flexibility regarding certain NCLBA requirements. State officials were concerned, however, about the effect of displaced students on their NCLBA academic accountability results. Education officials said that any decisions about how the students will be included in these results will be made in upcoming months.

# Appendix

## Contributors

If you have any questions concerning this briefing, please call Cindy Fagnoni, Managing Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, at (202) 512-7215 or Kay Brown, Assistant Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security, at (202) 512-3674.

Other key contributors to this briefing were Scott Spicer and Anjali Tekchandani.

## Scope and Methodology

To do our work, we:

- reviewed federal, state, and local data and elements of their disaster plans.
- interviewed officials from:
  - the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services;
  - the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children;
  - state education officials in Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and Alabama; and
  - state child welfare officials in Louisiana, Texas, and Alabama. (Mississippi state child welfare officials were not available to discuss how the Gulf Coast hurricanes affected children within their child welfare system.)
- conducted a site visit to Louisiana, the state with the highest number of displaced and missing children; in addition to the state education and child welfare officials, we interviewed:
  - public and private school district officials,
  - social workers and foster parents.
- conducted our work from October 2005 to March 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Much of the data regarding numbers of children affected are officials' best estimates. Determining exact numbers has been difficult because of the extent of the storm damage and the large numbers of displaced people.

## Related GAO Reports

*Hurricane Katrina: GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, GAO-06-442T, Washington, D.C.: March 8, 2006.

*Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Provision of Charitable Assistance*, GAO-06-297T, Washington, D.C.: December 13, 2005.

*September 11: More Effective Collaboration Could Enhance Charitable Organizations' Contributions in Disasters*, GAO-03-259, Washington, D.C.: December 19, 2002.

*Disaster Management: Improving the Nation's Response to Catastrophic Disasters*, RCED-93-186, Washington, D.C.: July 23, 1993.