

Federal commission studies recovery plans for children

*By Sarah Chacko
Advocate Capitol News Bureau
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Louisiana families recovering from 2005 hurricanes received inadequate assistance and guidance from federal programs, a federal commission noted Friday.

The National Commission on Children and Disasters is using information from Louisiana recovery officials about shortcomings after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 to create recommendations for a long-term recovery plan.

The commission was created by the U.S. Congress to study the needs of children during disaster preparation, response and recovery. Its recommendations are due in October.

“There’s so much focus on preparedness and response that recovery simply doesn’t make the grade,” said Commission Executive Director Christopher Revere. “There doesn’t seem to be any efforts to put recovery planning into these documents.”

Commission members also discussed recommendations from the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps to coordinate funding streams, measure outcomes and share information about needy families. The corps was created to assist families affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

The commission also discussed a report released Thursday by U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La. and chairwoman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Disaster Recovery Subcommittee.

The review called for better preparation and handling of the federal housing assistance program and expansion of the Stafford Act, the federal law outlining disaster relief, to catastrophic disasters.

“The Stafford Act is so yesterday,” joked Irwin Redlener, president of the Children’s Health Fund and member of the National Commission on Children and Disasters.

Redlener, who is also director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, said recovery now implies the physical rebuilding of schools and hospitals. Human services needed for long-term recovery have to be forced in, he said.

There are a lot of great groups who have tried to address recovery issues in their own silos, with a limited scope, said Dr. Michael Anderson, pediatric specialist at Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital in Ohio. But it is time for those efforts to be consolidated and streamlined, he said.

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“Let’s make this a reality,” Anderson said. “Let’s change what we need to change.”

A subcommittee of the commission came to Baton Rouge last month. Nonprofit organizations told members then that state and federal agencies lack transparency and the financial support they received was inadequate or missed the needs of families.

Commission members are also investigating problems with sheltering and medical care in disaster-affected areas.

In both the Baton Rouge meeting and Friday’s meeting in Washington, D.C., the question was raised about who would take the responsibility for long-term recovery, since it does not fall within the scope of any one state or federal agency.

And whoever or whatever is given that duty should have more than an advisory role, commission members said.

“While I think it’s a great statement to have somebody who can speak for these issues and be a representative to the president and the administration, I think we ought to look at exactly what the substantive role of such an office would be and how it interrelates with the various agencies that have specific legislative authority,” said Ernie Allen, director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Revere said commissioners are planning more subcommittee meetings in disaster-affected areas throughout the nation to see what has and has not worked for communities.

The next full committee meeting is tentatively scheduled for June.