Children have unique anatomical, physical, emotional, and developmental needs and are classified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as an “at-risk population.” Children make up nearly 25% of the population in the United States and each workday almost 70 million children are in child care or school, separated from their families. This large and unique population represents our future. Yet, in the aftermath of almost every major disaster, the need to further improve policies and procedures for children during and after a disaster is recognized. While progress has been made in preparing educational facilities, often the youngest and most vulnerable have been overlooked. This includes the 11 million children younger than five years who routinely receive childcare and who are too young to be enrolled in the K-12 system. This number has steadily risen over the past several decades, along with the trend of women in the work force.

Changing Demographics

Forty years ago, less than half of all mothers worked outside of the home, and only about a third of mothers with a child under age three worked outside of the home. Now, about 75% of mothers with children six to 17 years old are in the labor force, along with 61% of mothers with children under three years old. On average, children spend about 36 hours a week in child care.

As employment, demographic and socioeconomic trends change in the United States, the tactics, strategies and priorities of emergency management must change as well. Ensuring parents, child care providers and children are prepared not only helps protect our most vulnerable, but also increases community and economic resilience. Simply put, child care is a tremendous economic driver for communities.

During non-disaster times, child care breakdowns have huge financial impacts. Adjusted for inflation, U.S. businesses lose approximately $4.4 billion annually due to employee absenteeism as the result of child care breakdowns. Over a six-month period, 45% of parents are absent from work at least once, missing an average of 4.3 days, due to child care breakdowns. In addition, 65% of parents’ work schedules are affected by child care challenges an average of 7.5 times over a six-month period.

These challenges that exist on an everyday basis are further magnified during and after disaster. After a disaster, a lack of child care is the biggest impediment, aside from securing stable housing, for adults to return to work.

Impact of Disasters on the Child Care Sector

Some recent examples highlight the impact disasters can have on the child care sector:

- Superstorm Sandy impacted 11,500 licensed and registered child care programs in New York; that’s more than half of the total programs in the entire state. Sandy also caused the long-term closure of 697 child care programs in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York. Some programs were closed as long as eight months, while others never reopened.
- The Louisiana flooding in 2016 impacted at least 88 child care programs in the Baton Rouge area, displacing more than 6,000 children from child care. A month later, 45 programs remained closed.
- During Hurricane Matthew in 2016, more than a quarter of the child care providers in Cumberland County, North Carolina, closed, leaving an estimated 10,200 children temporarily without child care.

All of these disasters not only impacted the child care providers, but also exacted a tremendous toll on children, parents, employers and communities-at-large.

Why Has There Been so Much Recent Focus on Emergency Preparedness and Child Care?

For emergency management, the time is ripe for partnership and engagement with child care providers. The reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act in November 2014 was the single biggest piece of legislation impacting child care in nearly 20 years. CCDBG is administered to states in formula block grants, which are used to subsidize child care for low-income working families (around 1.5 million children per month) and to support activities that improve the overall quality of child care for all children.

CCDBG ushered in many new requirements, including: background
checks, health and safety standards, emergency preparedness planning, increased consumer education, and new quality initiatives, to name a small portion of the changes. As a result, each state is now working on, or has recently developed, an emergency plan for child care. Emergency managers should reach out to their state or local child care licensing agency to learn more about these new federal requirements.

Where Can Emergency Managers Learn More About Child Care in Their Community?

One of the major connections that emergency managers can make is with their local child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs). Throughout the country there are 572 CCR&Rs. These entities are staffed by early childhood experts and provide a myriad of services. Each year, they help nearly 1 million families find, evaluate or pay for child care. They also provide direct outreach, technical assistance and training to child care providers. Last year, CCR&Rs trained more than 580,000 child care providers.

CCR&Rs are a constant presence in local communities and serve as a resource for child care providers and families. These entities are natural partners with emergency management, as they are one of the only organizations that can authoritatively speak about the status and functioning of the child care sector before, during and after disasters.

Child Care Aware® of America, the national member-association for CCR&Rs, established a new emergency preparedness program in 2015. The program is focused on training CCR&R staff and child care providers, along with providing technical assistance, developing resources, engaging with key stakeholders, and advancing the national dialogue on the important role of child care before, during and after emergencies. Recently, Child Care Aware® of America has hired a full-time GIS analyst and is working with emergency management in several communities to create interactive maps that provide a complete picture of child care programs and assets. You can learn more at ChildCarePrepare.org.

Conclusion

In closing, children are our future. They have many unique characteristics, which make them vulnerable on many levels. Caring for children during disaster is of the upmost importance, however working solely with K-12 educational facilities will only cover a fraction of children. The functioning and continued viability of the child care sector is vital for community and business resilience. Working with child care providers helps further ensure that the needs of children, parents and the community are being met during a disaster. ▲