

How Children's Disaster Task Forces Can Help State and Local Jurisdictions Better Prepare to Meet the Disaster Needs of Children

By Drew Bumbak, Chair, IAEM-USA Children in Disasters Caucus

Children comprise almost 25% of the population of the United States¹, and they have distinct needs in disasters that often differ from the needs of adults. They also have “unique vulnerabilities that must be addressed in disaster management activities and policies,” as the National Commission on Children and Disasters (NCCD) noted in its 2010 final report.²

Approximately 69 million children are separated from their parents every weekday for an average of 9 hours in school or childcare settings and extra-curricular activities.³ In these settings, they're even more vulnerable as they are away from their families and in group settings with fewer adults to watch over, take care of, and help them in an emergency.

Despite the fact that children make up almost one quarter of our population, we are woefully unprepared to meet their needs during disasters.

Eleven years after Hurricane Katrina, only 21% of the NCCD recommendations are complete.^{4,5,6} Out of the nine different topical areas the NCCD assessed, just one has had all commission recommen-

dations implemented (Sheltering Standards, Services, and Supplies).^{7,8}

Furthermore, between 2004 and 2012, **less than 0.1%** of the approximately \$16.7 billion in Federal Preparedness Grants and funding was allocated for children's disaster preparedness needs.⁹

Save the Children Evaluates States Based on Four Criteria

Finally, Save The Children evaluates each state yearly with regard to children's preparedness, based on four criteria. These are not overly complex, pie-in-the-sky, unattainable goals. Rather, they are things that states can achieve with a little effort.

The state must require that all childcare providers:

1. Have a written multi-hazard plan for evacuating and safely moving children to an alternate site.
2. Have a written plan for emergency notification of parents and family reunification following an emergency.
3. Have a written plan that accounts for children with disabilities and those with access and functional needs, including a specific requirement of how all children with special needs will be included in the emergency plan.

Furthermore, the state must require:

4. That all schools, including public charter schools and private schools, have a disaster plan that addresses multiple types of hazards (not just fire and tornado) and covers multiple of responses including evacuation, shelter-in-place, and lockdown situations.

Unfortunately, though we're doing better, we're still not there. Though 32 states do meet all four criteria on Save The Children's annual *National Report Card on Protecting Children in Disasters*, 18 states and D.C. have not been able to meet all four criteria. What's worse, of these 18 states, one state doesn't meet *any* of the criteria.¹⁰

How Can We Improve These Shortcomings?

How do we better plan to meet the needs of children in disasters? While there are many different ways to address these shortcomings, a great place to start for most jurisdictions is by developing children's disaster task forces.

Children's disaster task forces (or children and youth disaster task forces), can help a state or other jurisdiction better prepare to meet the disaster needs of children before one happens. In a less optimal but still acceptable situation, a task force can help a jurisdiction to begin to meet the disaster needs of children better if the task force begins work during a disaster.

The children's disaster task force approach leverages the whole community approach, bringing

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^{1, 3} Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. [America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being 2016](#). Washington, D/C.

^{2, 4} 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).

^{5, 7, 9, 10} 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).

^{6, 8} Save The Children. [Status of the National Commission on Children and Disasters Report Recommendations \(2010\) July 2015](#). Fairfield, CT: Save The Children. (2015).

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together a jurisdiction’s emergency management, public safety, and all of the child- and youth-serving agencies, organizations, and professionals. Task force participants might include government, non-profit, and private sector organizations, including EMS, fire service, law enforcement, pediatric healthcare providers, hospitals, behavioral health providers, public health, school districts, private schools, childcare providers, Head Start programs, child welfare agencies, social services, VOADs, faith-based organizations, parks and recreation, recreation groups, community-based organizations, and a host of other organizations.

The task force provides a single forum in which they can all collabo-

rate to improve how the jurisdiction meets the needs of children in a disaster. To ensure the best use of resources and the best outcome for improving a jurisdiction’s preparedness to meet children’s disaster needs, the children’s disaster task force should be dedicated *solely* to the disaster needs of children, not on multiple children’s needs, such as disaster needs in addition to juvenile justice, mental health, child welfare, and education needs.

Benefits of the Children’s Disaster Task Force Approach

- Provides a venue for whole community coordination to support preparedness, response, and recovery efforts for children, youth, and families.
- Provides all partners with visibility on preparedness, response, and recovery efforts for children, youth, and families.

- Encourages a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to strategy and efforts to identify and address gaps in a jurisdiction’s ability to meet the needs of children, youths, and families in disasters.

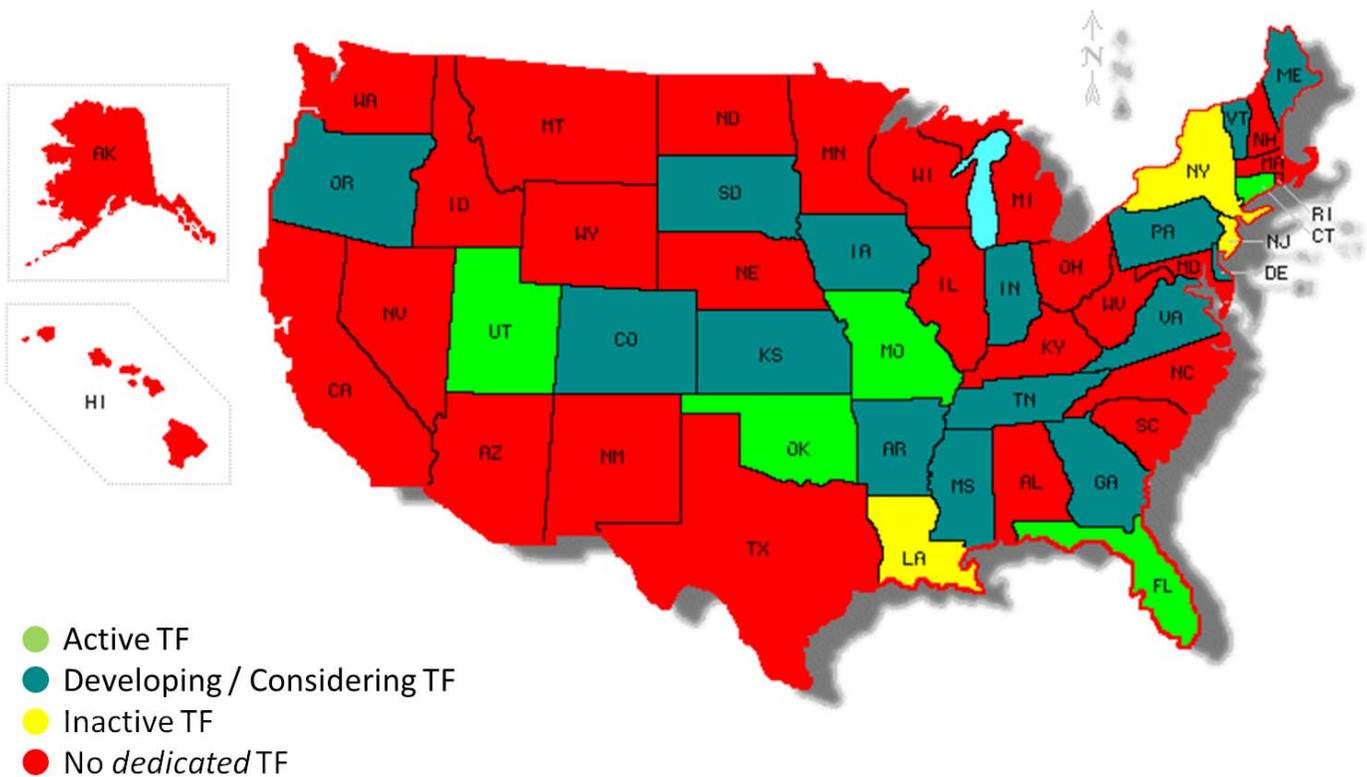
- Facilitates resource pooling by multiple jurisdictions to meet the needs of children and youth better and more efficiently.

- Provides child-serving organizations and agencies with the ability to consult with government, NGO, and private sector subject matter experts at the state and national level.

The task force approach has been instrumental in helping children in Missouri after the 2011 Joplin tornado, in Louisiana after Hurricane Isaac, and in New Jersey and New York after Hurricane Sandy. Additionally, children’s disaster task

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Dedicated Children’s Disasters Task Forces



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Forces have been instrumental in helping other states to plan, in “peace time,” how to meet the needs of children in disasters better.

Task forces that are active during a disaster can significantly help the jurisdiction by facilitating restoration of critical children and youth services, quickly moving to address new needs that result from the disaster, and supporting recovery efforts focused on the needs of children and youths.

Unfortunately, recent research shows that there are not many dedicated state-level children’s disaster task forces. Over the past five months, the IAEM-USA Children in Disasters Caucus has assessed task force use in the United States. We found that only five states currently have active task forces.

However, as shown on the map on page 16, the picture is not as bleak as it initially sounds. Though there are only five *active* task forces, three states have had active task forces in the past, which did their work and are now inactive (in

hibernation, if you will), awaiting activation should the state require their continued services during a future disaster. Additionally, at last count, 14 states, some encouraged by our broaching the topic, are either actively developing a task force, or are planning to do so in the near future.

Developing a Task Force

For obvious reasons, when building a task force, the best approach is to start during the preparedness phase, when no disasters are imminent. Of course, if a disaster is looming, and you have the time and bandwidth to start the task force, better to do so than to not. Experience shows that task forces developed during the response phase can be quite successful in improving the response to and outcomes for children in disasters. This is supported by the fact that most of the state-level task forces to date have been developed during the response phase of a major disaster, and have had a positive effect on response and recovery.

Though developing a task force is not difficult, it does require some work, particularly in outreach and

coordination. A key step in starting a task force is identifying potential partner agencies and organizations to recruit for the task force. As with any effort that has to include multiple partners, building and maintaining strong partnerships goes a long way to ensuring success.

Unfortunately, as noted above, the majority of state-level task forces developed to date are response phase task forces. Therefore, few best practices exist on preparedness phase task force development. However, many of the steps in response phase task force development apply to preparedness phase development.

Children’s Disaster Task Force Resources

As we conducted our research on which states have or are developing children’s disaster task forces, it quickly became clear that some of the states that are interested in developing task forces were not sure how best to go about developing them. Therefore, the IAEM-USA Children in Disasters Caucus has collected and created a number of resources devoted to helping jurisdictions develop children’s disaster task forces. See the [resources page](#) linked from the [caucus web page](#).

Although we surveyed only states in our study, I firmly believe that children’s disaster task forces can be an important resource for jurisdictions at all levels, and I believe that local and county task forces will provide great dividends. It is my hope that all IAEM members will take the time to determine where their jurisdiction is on this critical issue. Children are our most precious resource. We must do all that we can to protect, provide, and plan for their survival and recovery in the event of a disaster. ▲

The record on children’s needs at the state & local level is mixed

