

# Children Separated by Disasters: Reunification Challenges and Resources

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**F**amily communications plans, muster points, go bags – all of it might sound like a broken record to the general public, but it is an essential message that can potentially help to reunify families in the aftermath of a disaster.

Imagine that catastrophic event that you've been planning for, occurring in your jurisdiction in the early afternoon hours of a typical work day. In that scenario, ask yourself – where are the children who would most likely be impacted be located? The majority would most likely be at school or childcare. In fact, on a typical weekday, 67 million children across the country are in schools or childcare.<sup>1</sup>

Wherever they may be, have they been impacted by your catastrophic event? Are their parents who are most likely at work or at home, also impacted? Are you prepared to coordinate the response, recovery and reunification of these affected families?

It may not sound as challenging when thought of in an imaginary scenario, but if family reunification is not planned for adequately and you are facing a “perfect storm”-type disaster, the potential challenges, the extra resources, and the time and energy you will have to expend may very well become a disaster within the disaster.

## Real-Case Scenario

It was a lesson learned in the most difficult of ways during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when the

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 5,192 reports of displaced children who were stated as separated from their parents. It took a lot of resources, time and effort to locate, identify and reunite many of these children with their legal guardians. In fact, it took seven months after those storms made landfall to reunite the last child with family members. Seven months!?!)

Law enforcement, social services and emergency management agencies were inundated with many competing human services-related priorities, which only added to challenges and delays in reunifying children with their families.

When children become separated from those who best understand their individual needs, it becomes much more difficult for them to cope with their reality and adds to their anxiety and stress levels. If not planned for or protected properly, these minors also may be susceptible to maltreatment, abuse, kidnapping, and in the most extreme cases, exploitation.

Aside from the thousands of missing children reports that flooded 9-1-1 call centers, law enforcement and hospital phone lines, a significant number of unaccompanied minors were discovered in the immediate aftermath of Katrina in general population disaster shelters until state social services were notified. The state took action, developing safeguards to protect and identify these children until they could be reunified with their

guardians. This was challenging enough, but some of these children were too young or traumatized to self-identify, which made their reunification an even more daunting task. The state reached out to resources like NCMEC to assist them.

## NCMEC's Role

NCMEC fielded, assessed, and investigated all child-reunification related inquiries and leads, and worked directly with state social services and NCMEC's Team Adam on the ground. Team Adam is NCMEC's deployable work force, comprised of retired law enforcement personnel who have experience working in a variety of areas, chiefly relating to children. Team Adam offers technical assistance and hands-on support that can help states that may not have the large amounts of time, energy and resources required to reunify children with their families in the midst of a disaster.

Following Hurricane Katrina, Congress requested that NCMEC establish the National Emergency Child Locator Center, a call center designated to support child reunification-related calls, as stated in the 2006 Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act. NCMEC offers this call center resource, as well as other resources, at no cost to the states to help manage the task of reunifying children with their families.

Working in collaboration with the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), NCMEC developed the Unaccompanied Minors Registry (UMR), which is a free,

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the 2013 Post Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach document created by FEMA, U.S. Department of Health & Human Service, the American Red Cross and the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

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## More IAEM in Action Photos



From left to right: Scott Swearengen, CEM; Billy Zwerschke, CEM; Kate McClimans, CEM® Administrator; Daryl Spiewak CEM; Lanita Lloyd, CEM; Ryan Broughton, CEM; and Otis Latin, CEM.



### Updated CEM® /AEM<sup>SM</sup> Examination Underway

A CEM® working group met in Austin, Texas, Apr. 28-May 1, 2014, to work on updates to the CEM® /AEM<sup>SM</sup> Examination. They met in the Austin EOC, and while they were there, were given a tour of the EOC by working group member, Scott Swearengen, CEM.



Scott Swearengen, CEM, provided a tour of the Austin Emergency Operations Center.



The CEM® working group is shown in action as they determine needed updates to the CEM® /AEM<sup>SM</sup> Exam.

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online data collection tool that makes the swift reunification of children a top priority. The UMR creates a central location to register, store, and retrieve information on unaccompanied minors who have been separated from their families and legal guardians as a

result of a disaster. UMR's national portal at <http://umr.missingkids.com> is available for disaster-specific use.

### Conclusion

Planning for family reunification seems challenging with the various important elements that emergency managers need to consider. However, reunification experts from

FEMA, NCMEC, HHS and the American Red Cross have collaborated in the development of the newly released publication, "[2013 Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A Nationwide Approach](#)," which is a framework that can be used to help you develop your plan.

For more information, please contact the author at [shawa@ncmec.org](mailto:shawa@ncmec.org). ▲