

Pediatric Disaster Preparedness & Emergency Medical Services for Children

Children make up to 25 percent of the nation's population, yet are more vulnerable than adults in the case of an emergency or disaster. The National Commission on Children and Disasters (the Commission), found that although each new disaster presents distinct challenges, we can anticipate the needs of children, and therefore, we can and must prepare to meet those needs. The Commission, established by Congress in 2008, concluded that categorizing children as an "at-risk," "special needs," or "vulnerable" population, while well-intended, has inadvertently led to the benign neglect of children, in which they receive less attention in disaster planning rather than more.

The Youngest Victims: Disaster Preparedness to Meet Children's Needs

Children have important physical, physiological, developmental, and mental differences from adults that must be anticipated in the disaster planning process. From different dosages of medicines to smaller-sized medical equipment to psychological responses to trauma, children have different needs than adults. To meet these needs, emergency and disaster care providers require better training. Unfortunately, the country is not well-prepared to deal with these needs, especially in a surge situation—when a larger than usual number of patients show up in a hospital's emergency department.

A 2008 survey of hospital preparedness by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that:

- Less than one-third (32.4 percent) of hospitals had guidelines for increasing pediatric surge capacity;
- About one-third (34 percent) of hospitals had plans for reunification of children with families; and
- Only 42.6 percent of hospitals had a tracking system for accompanied and unaccompanied children.

Emergency Medical Services for Children Program

Established by Congress in 1984, the Emergency Medical Services for Children (EMSC) Program aims to ensure that all children receive state-of-the-art care in the case of an emergency. EMSC is the only federal program dedicated to improving emergency care for children, and has brought vital attention and resources to an otherwise neglected population by providing funds to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories to:

- Train and educate Emergency Medical Services (EMS) providers and emergency department staff;
- Develop pediatric protocols, guidelines, policy statements, and online toolkits on triage and treatment of children, interfacility transfer, and family-centered care; and
- Help states develop and institutionalize EMS for critically ill and injured children.

Reauthorized in 2010, the EMSC program is crucial to the continuing improvement of pediatric emergency care. The American Academy of Pediatrics urges Congress to fund the EMSC program at its fully authorized level of \$27,562,500 in Fiscal Year 2012.

For more information, please visit: www.aap.org/disasters.