

Hurricane Katrina: Two years in the life of a child

By Marian Wright Edelman

Two years ago, on August 29, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi, displacing hundreds of thousands.

Black communities that had been economically depressed before



Lower 9th Ward resident Priscilla Perkins holds up a cross as she rings a bell in memory of her grandfather, George Perkins on the steps what once was his home at Rene and Derbigny streets in the Lower 9th Ward. Her grandfather died during Hurricane Katrina.

the hurricane were hardest hit. It is a national scandal that many children are still plagued by the trauma of their horrific experiences of survival in the aftermath of the storm. *Katrina's Children: Still Waiting*, an update of the 2006 Children's Defense Fund report, *Katrina's Children: A Call to Conscience and Action*, prepared in March of 2007, found that about 100,000 children still do not live where they did when the hurricane struck. Tens of thousands of children suffer from disorientation and isolation. Children living in the most flood-damaged areas of New Orleans still have severely limited access to health and mental health care, and the schools they attend are understaffed and poorly equipped. The story of New Orleans is illustrative of the broad unmet needs throughout much of the region.

After the hurricane passed, on September 15, 2005, President George W. Bush addressed the nation from Jackson Square in New Orleans. He committed to helping "the citizens of the Gulf Coast to overcome this disaster, put their lives back together, and rebuild their communities." He also said, "Federal funds will cover the great majority of the costs of repairing public infrastructure in the disaster

zone, from roads and bridges to schools and water systems. Our goal is to get the work done quickly."

There is little semblance between the President's pledge and actions taken over the past two years. Depressed, even suicidal parents and children are still packed like sardines in cramped, flimsy, often unsafe trailers in camps next to nowhere. The education infrastructure is far from being repaired, with many school age children not in school. Only 55 public schools in New Orleans were

open in December 2006, 43 percent of the pre-Katrina number. Thousands of children did not attend school for months after the hurricane hit. During this past spring semester, 300 students attempting to enroll in school were waitlisted. It has been reported that the New Orleans school system currently faces a shortfall of at least 500 teachers this school year. There aren't enough textbooks and supplies to go around. While the government fails to fulfill promises, un-



A prayer is said on the N. Claiborne bridge before a wreath is thrown in the industrial canal in memory of those who lost their lives during Hurricane Katrina

told numbers of children are falling farther and farther behind.

Two years ago, the President promised to address the Gulf Coast's health care emergency, saying, "To relieve the burden on local health care facilities in the region, we're sending extra doctors and nurses to these areas." That didn't happen. Katrina's children have been hung out to dry without mental health and health coverage, and the President is now threatening to veto a modest State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) reauthorization bill that would serve only about three to four million of America's nine million uninsured children. And neither the House nor the Senate SCHIP bill guarantees the mental health coverage that Katrina's children desperately need. Before the hurricane, there were 3,200 physicians in Orleans Parish and surrounding parishes. Our updated report found only about 1,200 physicians now.

The impact and implications of this massive national child and family abandonment are profound. Huge numbers of child disaster survivors have experienced and will continue to experience serious emotional and behavioral difficulties, including feeling sad or depressed, being nervous or afraid, and having problems sleeping or getting along with others. Yet, in the City of New Orleans today there are fewer than 15 child psychiatrists, and many of them are in private practice and do not serve poor children.

New Orleans pediatrician Gary Peck, a board member of the American Academy of Pediatrics, says the 180 pediatricians in the city before Katrina have dropped to 140. That means many children in low-

income families have much less access to primary care. Consider what that means to parents trying to ensure that their children stay on schedule to receive the more than 20 immunizations shots recommended between birth and two.

Any two-year period can seem to be a lifetime for a child and can have a lifetime effect on his or her development. The neglect and abandonment of Katrina's children over the last two years is an outrage. Shame on the President for failing to make good on his promises to rebuild communities savaged by Hurricane Katrina. And shame on our community of we do not continue to make a mighty noise until he keeps his broken promises.

(Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council whose Leave No Child Behind mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start, and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.)

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