

Family Separation and Displacement Resources

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Unaccompanied Children in Disasters – Promoting Mother and Child Reunion

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For family separation, there are resources to help them reunification. In a presidential declared disaster, FEMA activates the National Emergency Family Registry and Locator System (1-800-588-9822), which allows people to voluntarily register and share information on post-disaster well-being or location with specified family members. Those trying to find displaced friends or families can in turn use this resource to search for them.

For locating children under 21, FEMA refers to the Emergency Child Locator Center, run by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They have a toll-free hotline (1-866-908-9572) and website to receive reports of displaced children. They deploy staff to the declared disaster area to gather information about displaced children, partnering with federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies.

Red Cross maintains a web page system called “Safe and Well”. It allows anyone in a disaster to enter a “safe” message, stating briefly where they are (home, shelter, friend, hotel). They also enter pre-disaster and current contact information. This is not publicly listed but Red Cross can use it in attempts to reunite families. Others can search Safe and Well for messages, based on pre-disaster phone numbers or home address.

Locally, local law enforcement, child welfare, and red cross should play a role in both arranging care and working on reunification for children separated from families by disaster. Just like for schools, I couldn't find much on-line in the way of local plans. Hospitals and emergency responders (fire, ambulance) have required written plans for unaccompanied minors, including identification, supervision, and transfer through different healthcare settings. CERT teams and MRC units probably need something similar.

Family Planning for Potential Separation

Planning for unaccompanied minors, like many aspects of emergency preparedness, is an acknowledged problem that has not yet been solved. The good news is that everyone cares about children and it's highly likely they will receive care. The bad news is that I can't tell what the care will look like. Individual preparedness is key in this area as well.

Here are some suggestions for parents to prevent separation and promote reunification:

- Always know where your kids are.
- Take time now to investigate emergency plans for school, child-care, and other locations where you leave your child.
- Help children memorize their name, family first and last names, the most important phone number, home address, and important medical information (like asthma, allergies).
- Make a master list of all family members (immediate and expanded), with addresses and multiple phone numbers. Add recent digital photos of all immediate family members.
- Expand the list of trusted people allowed to pick up your child in an emergency. Instead of just including parents, consider adding friends or other family likely to be near-by after a disaster. Give written authorization for schools to release your child to these people.
- Give both lists to schools, child care, and other locations where your children might be away from you. (Official forms are such a pain that we often just quickly fill in one emergency contact and one phone number.)
- Give copies of the lists to everyone on them, creating a mini-network.
- Try to keep a copy of the list with your child at all times, using backpacks, lockers, cars, and the child's go-bag. If your kids have cell phones, enter this info (perhaps listed under ICE – In Case of Emergency).
- Review and update your lists every year. People move, appearances vary, and phone numbers change. The only helpful list is a current list!
- Include the lists, plus phone numbers and web sites for the above resources in parent cell phones. Bring a copy with you when you travel, and print one out for your go-bag.
- Review emergency plans for separation with your children, adjusting the message to their maturity. Practice memorization of personal information, review where to find the

family contact list, and teach them to identify authorities that can help them. Most importantly, reassure children that if separated, they will be reunited with family, and people will take care of them until then.

I promise to keep children in mind, and write other child disaster articles. For example, children have unique needs in emergency healthcare, shelter management, and mental health. I would love to hear from anyone with specific knowledge or experience on plans for unaccompanied children in disasters. Teachers, parents, child welfare – leave a comment