Shelter survey provides insights into services, children’s needs

STARKVILLE, Miss.—A Mississippi State University survey of relief shelters operating in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina will provide information to help match resources and evacuee needs in the future, said project leaders.

Developed by research scientists at the nationally recognized Social Science Research Center, the telephone surveys of 47 shelters were conducted in the second, third and fourth weeks immediately after the Category 4 storm that battered the Gulf Coast. Shelters from around the state participated.

“We wanted to focus particularly on the needs of children,” said Linda H. Southward, director of the SSRC’s Family and Children’s Research Unit, and an author of “About Children,” a major reference published last year by Mississippi State and the American Academy of Pediatrics. “Our survey showed that approximately 23 percent of shelter residents were children, and of those, close to half were infants, toddlers or pre-schoolers,” she explained.

“Given the magnitude of the disaster, we felt this was an important survey that will help future responses,” Southward said.

The research team discovered shelters often were creative in finding resources and were doing an outstanding job of providing basic necessities such as food and water.

“Most indicated they received supplies from the Red Cross, churches, businesses, and private donors,” said research associate Humphrey Costello. One shelter reported receiving supplies from FEMA.
Survey of Relief Shelters/2

The surveyed shelters also were asked about resources such as clothes, books/educational materials, toys, health care, oral care, and mental health assistance. The research team discovered opportunities for improved resources in some areas, especially oral health care, which was identified as an unmet need by some 17 percent of those responding.

“We also identified a need for ‘secondary’ resources such as books, toys and educational materials,” said Heather Hanna, SSRC research associate, noting that dislocation is a stress that particularly affects children.

In addition, Costello said, “there’s much for adults to attend to, and often many hours of standing in line and filling out forms. There’s a real need to have resources available for children.”

The MSU research team said the survey showed the magnitude of volunteer services in the Magnolia State.

“Volunteers were reported to have worked an average of 15 hours a week,” said project director Linda Southward. “At the time of the survey, almost one-third of shelter directors said they anticipated a need for even more volunteers.”

The survey, which will provide the basis for ongoing MSU research on child and family services following a natural disaster, highlighted the needs of a vulnerable population, the research team said.

“From the data and from what shelter directors told us, there’s a need to coordinate children’s activities, supplies and materials,” Costello concluded.

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For more information about the MSU survey of relief shelters, contact Linda Southward at 662-325-0851.