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FORMER CHILD WELFARE LEADER OFFERS INSIGHTS ON LESSONS LEARNED FROM HURRICANE KATRINA AT COA'S PUBLIC AGENCY ROUNDTABLE

On October 17, 18, and 19, 2005, COA held its ninth Public Agency Roundtable, *Accreditation: The Path to Excellence* in Little Rock Arkansas. Since 1999, our roundtables have served as an invaluable forum for public agencies to share ideas, collaborate on statewide improvements, and ultimately assist each other reach their mutual goals of delivering quality services to children, youth, individuals, and families.

This year's Public Agency Roundtable included a special presentation by Carmen Weisner, former Assistant Secretary for the Louisiana Department of Public Service, Office of Community Services. The Office of Community Services represents Louisiana's child welfare system. Ms. Weisner offered an array of important insights and raised timely questions for social service delivery systems regarding the assessment of preparedness for disasters. Her remarks received a standing ovation from the roundtable attendees, which consisted of more than 175 professionals, who had gathered to celebrate Arkansas achievement of COA accreditation. Following please find Ms. Weisner's speech in its entirety.

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COA LUNCHEON ADDRESS

WILL YOUR AGENCY BE PREPARED FOR A DISASTER?

Presented by

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Executive Director of NASW-Louisiana Chapter**

**October 18, 2005
Double Tree Hotel
Little Rock, Arkansas**

Thank you for your kind words. I come before you initially to talk about issues and administrative matters that you should consider when developing and refining your disaster plans for your agencies. Before I talk about those issues of interest I want to say a few words on behalf of my fellow citizens of the state of Louisiana. I have been a life long resident of the bayou state. I was born and reared in the heart of Acadiana, "Cajun country" that in some way accounts for my unusual southern accent. I love my home state, its people, its proud heritage, and our "joyeau de vive" joy of life. If you have ever visited the southern most part of the state of Louisiana you can easily acknowledge that the people of Louisiana are the very essence of what you took home with you. Our people are hurting. Any area below the I-10 corridor has suffered the ravages of two major hurricanes to hit the US coastline in less than 30 days. Many have lost their homes, their livelihoods, friends, and family. They have a strong resolve to recover. It will be hard for many, impossible for some. You all watched the drama of the superdome on television, the faces of poverty, the devastation of the Mississippi gulf coast. For those of us on the ground, the first four or five days following hurricane Katrina were surreal. We struggled in the Baton Rouge area with being the primary location for launching search and recovery efforts. Social service agencies, medical personnel, and individual volunteers from throughout the area were propelled into action. We all have our individual stories that play out in our memories and for a period of time in our dreams.

We do want to thank each of you for your kind wishes, your willingness to help, your opening of your state borders to our citizens who may now be in your states impacting your service delivery system. We pray that if you are ever in need that we can return the favor. WE do not want to be defined by this storm. We want to be seen as a integral part of the fabric of this great country that overcomes hardship. We are all Americans and it will take all of us working together to help the Gulf Coast area recover. For now, I can honestly say, "I know what it means to miss New Orleans."

But now, let me get to the issues that Allyson asked that I talk about in the next few minutes. Are you prepared for a disaster? Could your state handle some of the unique challenges that Louisiana and Mississippi are encountering? As indicated in my introduction, I spent a large portion of my professional career embedded in a public child welfare agency. I had the pleasure

of guiding that agency toward accreditation. We had envisioned that the process would provide a “blue print” for running a quality organization and would serve as a mean of mentoring younger staff to take over and improve the efforts of those that had come before them.

A disaster of the magnitude experienced in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama could never have been plotted out in our blue print. However, I think that some of the challenges that have surfaced and we are dealing with could indeed help you perfect your blue print model for your organization. These are the things that you and your staff need to consider when you return home and begin strategic planning around a disaster plan. Let’s start by giving you some factors to build into your worst case scenario. The city/local to be impacted is your largest metropolitan area. The caseload is 1/3 of the states total number of children in care. The workforce is over 1/3 of your agency’s capacity. The service delivery support system includes major medical centers, major universities, large social service delivery systems of the caliber of Associated Catholic Charities, Volunteers of America, Family Services, Kingsley House (one of the oldest settlement houses in the country), a large charity hospital system, medical centers associated with two large medical schools, large adolescent mental health treatment centers that serve not just the youth in the impacted area’s but youth statewide, over 1,500 social workers who are employed in various human service delivery systems, a large public school system, a large parochial school system, a juvenile court system that has been key to many of the tracking and reporting you are doing for your Program Improvement Plan and will be part of any subsequent federal review because it is your major metropolitan area, the location of all of the state’s vital records (birth and death certificates), the location of your state’s supreme court, the largest economic engine for your state’s economy, a population with a high level of poverty, a population with low literacy levels, a state where child well being indicators are traditionally in the lower ranks (say 49th) and where over 1.5 million call home.

1. If you have to evacuate your major metropolitan area in your state, do you know where all of the children in your custody are going? Consider these issues:

- **When certifying and approving your caregivers (foster parents, residential care facilities, relative care givers), do you ask the question of where they will evacuate to in the event of a disaster?** Where would you store this type of information? What would be the periodicity for updating this information? If you envision having this information on a form in the case record, how would you get to the information if you are not allowed into the area to retrieve your record? If you envision that it needs to be in your large data base, how quickly can you make the changes to the system to incorporate the information and can your workforce get the data enter quickly to prepare you for a disaster that may or may not come? Will you incorporate this issue in your CQI process as a critical element to check in your reviews? Will your licensing elements also need to make this a standard for your contracted private agency providers? How would you monitor this? Will your courts now begin to ask this of your workers when they are participating in court reviews?
- **What about your workforce? Do you have informing elements as part of their job requirements?** If everyone is evacuating, do you know where each one of your staff members are going? Did the caregiver inform their caseworker where they are going? How would that information be transmitted to a central source for tracking purposes? Do you have a personnel requirement that they check in with you within a certain timeframe? If their local office is out of commission, what number are they to call? Do you already have that number posted? Are they all aware of this process? Can you or should you make it part of your personnel processes when you return? Can you issue paychecks?

Are the state's banking processes able to direct deposit paychecks or are you still issuing paper checks? If paper, how would you get them their money? The mail delivery system is out of service and mail is being held or rerouted. How long do you keep them on salary if you are unable to tell them a different location to report to duty? Do you have some unique civil service rules and regulations that you need to confront to furlough staff?, layoff staff, etc.

2. **What about your records?** Are all of your critical documents now embedded in your SACWIS? Do you have some items kept in a paper document? Can you recreate court orders and other legal, medical, and service related documents if you needed to send to another state to help them serve children/clients that have relocated? Remember, your court system cannot get access to their records, the service delivery support system is not functioning, you cannot get a copy of a birth certificate, marriage license, a death certificate, amended court order, documentation of recent XIX or IV-E eligibility determination, etc. the list just could go on and on. If you think you need to now embed all of this in your electronic case record, do you have this covered in your current SACWIS design? Will you need to go out on bid to amend contract to cover this if needed for worse case scenario? Will your legislators support this type of expenditure when they do not believe you are at risk and the state is already faced with more needs than you have capacity to handle?
3. **Our federal partners.** Would you need to involve them early in the recovery process? Remember, they do not routinely communicate with FEMA. How will this disaster impact your Program Improvement Plan for the short term/long term? What about reporting on the indicators? Will they be able to waive federal statutory requirements? Will they allow you to use cost allocation data from previous quarters to permit you to continue to make a draw of federal funds at the same level as prior to the storm? Do you still have the same level of State General Fund to match? Can you continue to sustain your IV-E caseload mix/penetration rate without timely redeterminations?
4. **Staff development.** I see that tomorrow you will be discussing recruitment and retention of child welfare staff. You have two major schools of social work off line. Will you still be able to sustain the same graduation rate to assure that you will have qualified staff to perform child welfare functions in the short term and long term? If the students went to other states to complete their education, do you think they will return? Can your civil service salaries now compete with the salary dollars now being paid by FEMA contractors staffing up Disaster Recovery Centers? Remember, this is a disaster of magnitude never before experienced in the country and we envision that FEMA will continue to have a presence for several years? Will some of the various federal departments allow for sharing of information on clients to help with locating children and families?
5. **How much do you use the media?** Who will control the media in getting your message out? What will be your message? Is your data reliable?
6. **Many offers of help?** There are many offers of help. You are overwhelmed with the outpouring of support. You realize your crisis/disaster is just one headline away from moving to page 6 of national newspapers. When do you bring in volunteers from other states? There is no place to house people so where would your volunteers stay? Are they skilled in disasters services, trauma, etc? do you and your staff need training about these issues too?
7. **Other than the usual suspects of community partners, do you now need to include others in rebuilding, reforming, and improving?** My guess is yes. I would think that

many advocates and emerging service delivery systems will now create a different pool of people you will need to invite to meetings to discuss child welfare issues. Remember your state chapter of NASW and your non-profit association when inviting. At the national level, COA, Child Welfare League of America, the Alliance for Children and Families, and the American Public Human Services Association should also be in the mix.

8. **Will the disaster in your state have an impact on the service delivery system in other states?** If so, what roles to you have in terms of informing on cultural issues, jurisdictional issues, etc.

Now, if we have time, I can take a few questions.

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