

**GAO**

Report to the Ranking Minority  
Member, Subcommittee on Human  
Resources, Committee on Ways and  
Means, House of Representatives

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July 2006

# CHILD WELFARE

## Federal Action Needed to Ensure States Have Plans to Safeguard Children in the Child Welfare System Displaced by Disasters



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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

July 28, 2006

The Honorable Jim McDermott  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Human Resources  
Committee on Ways and Means  
House of Representatives

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, there were 48 federally declared disasters in 2005. Two of these disasters—Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—resulted in a prolonged interruption of child welfare services and the dispersion of thousands of children in Louisiana’s foster care system to 19 states. As a result, there has been growing interest in the extent to which states have developed strategies to cope with disasters that could result in the dispersion of children in the child welfare system.

You asked us to conduct a study of the challenges facing state child welfare systems, including the development of plans for dealing with the dispersion of children in the child welfare system due to disasters. This report addresses state child welfare disaster planning. Specifically, we are providing information on (1) the number of states that have statewide child welfare disaster plans and the primary components of those plans, (2) the extent to which states that experienced federally declared disasters in 2005 also had child welfare disaster plans, and (3) how the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) supports states’ efforts to develop child welfare disaster plans.

We used multiple data collection methods, as part of the broader study, to obtain this information. First, we surveyed state child welfare directors in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to obtain information on the strategies that they developed to cope with disasters that could result in the dispersion of children. Second, we interviewed child welfare officials in five states: California, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah. These states were selected for variance in program administration (state administered, state-supervised/county-administered, state and county administered), the predominance of urban or rural characteristics, the achievement of child welfare standards on HHS’s Child and Family Services Review, changes in the number of children reported to be in foster care; and geographic location. In addition, we interviewed federal child welfare officials and representatives from national child welfare organizations concerning the strategies that states had developed. Finally,

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we analyzed agency documentation, legislation, and other material related to child welfare programs and requirements. We conducted our work between October 2005 and June 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

On June 26, 2006, we briefed your staff on the results of our study of state child welfare disaster planning. This report formally conveys the information provided during that briefing. In summary, we found that

- Twenty states and the District of Columbia reported that they had a written child welfare disaster plan. However, the plans varied in the extent to which they included selected child welfare program components, such as identifying children under state care who may be dispersed. Specifically:
  - nineteen state plans addressed preserving child welfare records,
  - thirteen state plans addressed identifying children who may be dispersed,
  - eleven state plans addressed identifying new child welfare cases and providing services,
  - ten state plans addressed coordinating services and sharing information with other states, and
  - six state plans addressed placing children from other states.
- Of the 29 states and Puerto Rico that experienced a federally declared disaster in 2005, 8 reported having a written child welfare disaster plan.
- While HHS does not have the authority to require states to develop child welfare disaster plans, it has assisted states in developing child welfare disaster plans by issuing guidance in 1995 and funding technical assistance on disaster planning through its network of national resource centers. The guidance generally does not address the potential dispersion of children and families in a disaster. In addition, child welfare officials reported that additional disaster planning assistance from the federal government would be helpful, including information or training on how to develop a disaster plan and what to include.

HHS is planning several actions with regard to child welfare disaster planning. First, the department plans to hold a child welfare disaster planning conference for states in August 2006. Second, HHS is updating its 1995 disaster planning guidance for release at the conference. Finally, the department has asked states to voluntarily submit copies of their disaster plans for review by December 2006. However, it is unclear how much

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these efforts will address the potential dispersion of children and families in a disaster.

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## Conclusions

In the absence of federal requirements that states develop child welfare disaster plans, many states have not done so. In addition, states that have developed disaster plans do not always address the dispersion of children and families. The lack of plans for dealing with the dispersion of children may result in confusion at a time when families are under strain and need services most. Without minimum requirements on what states should include in their child welfare disaster plans, some states may be unable to ensure the continuity of services within and across state lines for the children under their care.

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## Matter for Congressional Consideration

To ensure continuity of services within or across state lines for the children under state care, Congress should consider requiring that states develop and submit child welfare disaster plans for HHS review.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To better assist states in developing child welfare disaster plans, we are recommending that the Secretary of Health and Human Services ensure that the department's child welfare disaster planning guidance address the dispersion of children and families within and across state lines. This guidance should include information on

- preserving child welfare records,
- identifying children who may be dispersed,
- identifying new child welfare cases and providing services,
- coordinating services and sharing information with other states, and
- placing children from other states.

Finally, we are recommending that the Secretary develop and provide training on child welfare disaster planning to all states.

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## Comments from the Administration for Children and Families and Our Evaluation

HHS's Administration for Children and Families provided written comments on a draft of this report; these comments appear in appendix IV. Regarding our recommendations that HHS ensure that the department's guidance and training to states on child welfare disaster planning address the dispersion of children and families, ACF stated that it has taken action to update the guidance and provide training to states and will encourage

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them to develop and submit disaster plans for review. ACF also requested that the report be modified to clarify that the focus of this report is on programmatic Disaster Recovery Plans (DRP) rather than on information technology DRPs. ACF stated that states have information technology-related DRPs for their automated systems and those plans address the need for preserving essential information recorded in the electronic case records. We clarified this point in the report.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, relevant congressional committees, and other interested parties and will make copies available to others upon request. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215. Key contributors may be found on the last page of the report.

*Cornelia M. Ashby*

Cornelia M. Ashby  
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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# Appendix I: Child Welfare Disaster Planning Presentation

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## Child Welfare Disaster Planning

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Briefing for  
Representative Jim McDermott, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Human Resources  
House Committee on Ways and Means

June 2006

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## Introduction

- Two 2005 disasters—Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—resulted in a prolonged interruption of child welfare services and the dispersion of thousands of Louisiana’s child welfare children to 19 states.
- There has been growing interest in the extent to which states have developed strategies to cope with disasters that could result in the dispersal of children in the child welfare system.



## Objectives

Our objectives were to determine:

Q1: How many states have statewide child welfare disaster plans and what are the primary components of those plans?

Q2: To what extent do the states that experienced federally declared disasters in 2005 also have child welfare disaster plans?

Q3: How does the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) support states' efforts to develop child welfare disaster plans?



## Scope and Methodology

To attain our objectives, we

- Surveyed state child welfare officials in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Thirty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico responded to the questions on disaster planning.
- Interviewed child welfare officials in five states: California, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah.
- Interviewed federal child welfare officials and reviewed agency documentation.

We conducted our work between October 2005 and June 2006 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.



## Summary of Results

We found that

- Twenty states and the District of Columbia reported that they had a written child welfare disaster plan. However, the plans varied in the extent to which they addressed selected child welfare program components, such as identifying children under state care who may be dispersed.
- Eight of the 29 states, plus Puerto Rico, that experienced a federally declared disaster in 2005 reported having a written child welfare disaster plan.



## Summary of Results

- HHS has assisted states in developing child welfare disaster plans by issuing guidance and funding technical assistance on disaster planning through its network of national resource centers. The guidance, however, generally does not address the potential dispersion of children and families in a disaster.



## Background

- Child welfare programs are intended to prevent child abuse and neglect and to protect and improve the lives of children who have experienced maltreatment.
- HHS's Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) establishes policy, oversees states' child welfare programs, and provides technical assistance to states primarily through its national resource centers (NRC).
- State or local child welfare agencies administer the programs and monitor the children and their families.



## Background

- In order to receive federal child welfare funds, states must meet a set of program requirements that are described in their 5-year Child and Family Services Plans.
- There are no federal requirements for states to develop plans that address the needs of children during disasters. However, according to HHS, states have developed information technology-related DRPs that address the need for preserving essential information recorded in electronic case records.



## Background

- In 2005, 29 states and Puerto Rico experienced federally declared disasters.
- Severe storms and flooding were the most commonly experienced types of disaster.
- A disaster can affect states that do not directly experience the disaster when they receive children evacuated from states experiencing the disaster.





## Research Question 1

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How many states have statewide child welfare disaster plans and what are the primary components of those plans?



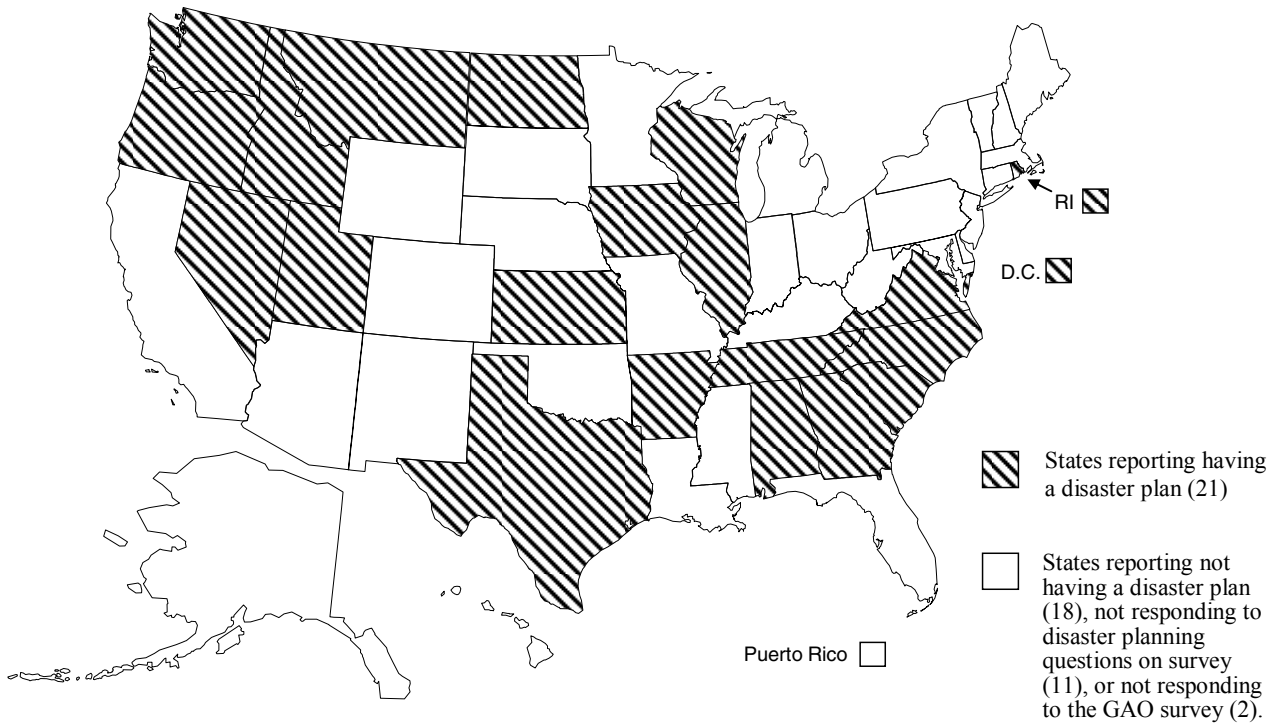
## Q1: Status of State Disaster Plans

In a GAO survey of state child welfare officials in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico:

- Twenty states and the District of Columbia responded that they had a written child welfare disaster plan.
- Seventeen states and Puerto Rico responded that they did not have a written child welfare disaster plan.
- Eleven states did not respond to the disaster planning questions in the GAO child welfare survey.
- Two states did not respond to the survey.



### Q1: Status of State Disaster Plans



Source: Analysis of GAO national survey of state child welfare systems challenges.

Note: In this slide the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are considered states.



**Q1: States Reporting Not Having a Plan or Not Responding**

<b>States reporting not having a plan</b>	
Alaska	Minnesota
Arizona	Mississippi
California	Missouri
Delaware	New Hampshire
Florida	New Mexico
Hawaii	Ohio
Indiana	Puerto Rico
Maryland	Vermont
Michigan	West Virginia

<b>States not responding to disaster planning questions</b>	
Colorado	New York
Connecticut	Oklahoma
Kentucky	Pennsylvania
Louisiana	South Dakota
Maine	Wyoming
New Jersey	

<b>States not responding to survey</b>	
Massachusetts	Nebraska



## Q1: Selected Child Welfare Program Components

GAO surveyed state child welfare officials in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico on whether their state's child welfare disaster plan addressed each of the following selected program components:

- identifying children under state care who may be dispersed,
- identifying caseworkers who may be dispersed,
- continuing services for children under state care who may be dispersed,
- coordinating services and sharing information with intrastate agencies,



## Q1: Selected Child Welfare Program Components, con't.

- coordinating services and sharing information with other states,
- placing children from other states,
- providing in-home family services to children from other states,
- identifying new child welfare cases and providing appropriate services, and
- preserving essential case information, electronic and documentary.



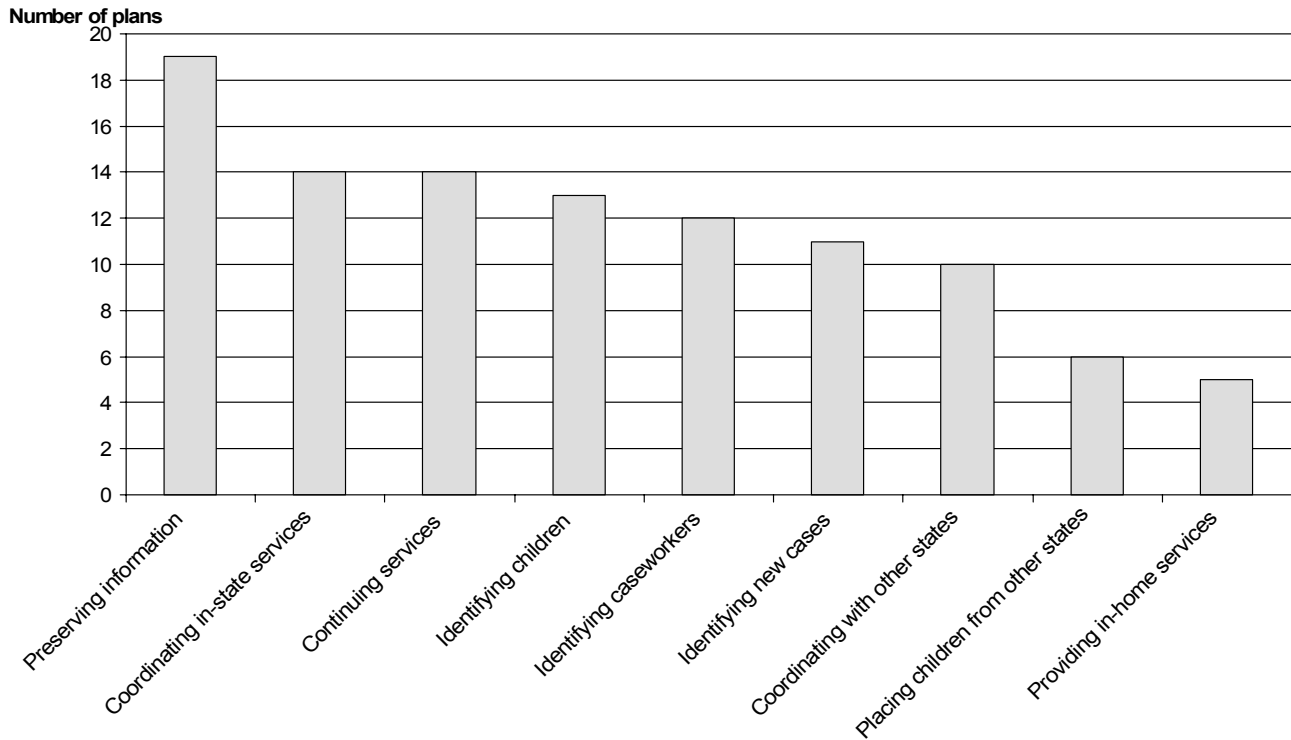
## Q1: Selected Child Welfare Disaster Plan Elements, con't.

The 21 existing child welfare disaster plans varied in the extent to which they addressed selected child welfare program elements.

For example, 3 states—Illinois, Montana, and Washington—addressed all of the selected child welfare program elements.



### Q1: Program Components Addressed by State Disaster Plans



Source: Analysis of GAO national survey of state child welfare systems challenges.





## Research Question 2

To what extent do the states that experienced federally declared disasters in 2005 also have child welfare disaster plans?



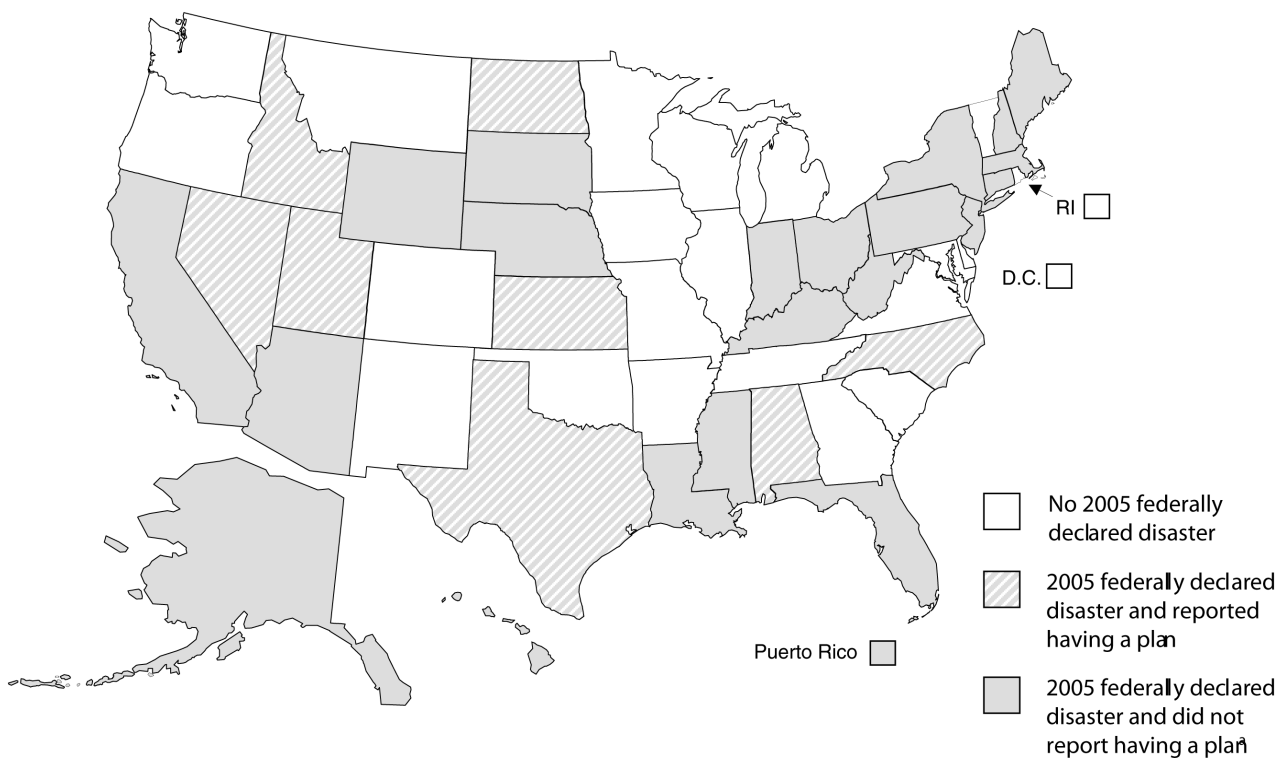
## Q2: Comparison of States With Disasters And Existing Disaster Plans

Of the 29 states and Puerto Rico that experienced a federally declared disaster in 2005:

- Eight states reported having written child welfare disaster plans.
- Ten states and Puerto Rico reported that they did not have a written child welfare disaster plan.
- Nine states did not respond to the disaster planning questions contained in the GAO survey.
- Two states did not respond to the GAO survey.



## Q2: Disaster Plan Status for States with Federally Declared Disasters in 2005



Source: Analysis of GAO national survey of state child welfare systems challenges.

<sup>a</sup> Massachusetts and Nebraska had disasters but did not respond to the GAO survey.



## Research Question 3

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How does the Department of Health and Human Services support states' efforts to develop child welfare disaster plans?



### Q3: HHS Efforts To Assist States In Developing Disaster Plans

HHS has assisted states in developing child welfare disaster plans by:

- providing disaster planning guidance to states in 1995;
- disseminating disaster planning guidance through the National Resource Centers for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, and on Legal and Judicial Issues Web sites; and
- providing \$2.8 million to eight National Resource Centers to help states with disaster planning.



### Q3: HHS Disaster Planning Guidance Is Limited

Federal disaster planning guidance generally does not address:

- identifying children who may be dispersed,
- preserving child welfare records,
- coordinating services and sharing information with other states,
- placing children from other states, and
- identifying new child welfare cases and providing services.



### Q3: Additional Federal Assistance On Disaster Planning Would Be Helpful

Child welfare officials reported that additional disaster planning assistance from the federal government would be helpful, including:

- information on disaster planning requirements or criteria,
- training on how to develop a disaster plan,
- examples of good disaster plans, and
- forums for exchanging disaster planning information with other states.



## HHS's Child Welfare Disaster Planning Initiatives

HHS initiatives to improve state child welfare disaster planning include:

- planning a child welfare disaster planning conference for states in August 2006,
- updating its 1995 disaster planning guidance for release at the conference, and
- asking states to voluntarily submit copies of their disaster plans for review by December 2006.





## Conclusions

- In the absence of federal requirements that states develop disaster plans, many states have not done so.
- Without disaster plans, these states may be unprepared to provide continuity of services for children and families who have been dispersed to or from other counties in the state or across state lines.



## Conclusions

- States that have developed disaster plans do not always address the dispersal of child welfare children and families, and the lack of dispersal plans may result in confusion at a time when families are under strain and need services most.
- Without minimum requirements on what states should include in their child welfare disaster plans, some states may be unable to ensure continuity of services within or across state lines for the children under their care.
  - For example, of Louisiana's 5,000 foster children, close to 2,000 were displaced by Hurricane Katrina. During that time, child welfare officials did not have current emergency contact information, which made it hard for them to find the foster families that had to evacuate.



## Matter for Congressional Consideration

To ensure continuity of services within or across state lines for the children under state care, Congress should consider requiring that states develop and submit child welfare disaster plans for HHS review.



## Recommendations

To better assist states in developing child welfare disaster plans, we recommend that the Secretary of Health and Human Services:

- ensure that the department’s disaster planning guidance address the dispersion of children and families within and across state lines, including steps for:
  - identifying children who may be dispersed,
  - preserving child welfare records,
  - coordinating services and sharing information with other states,
  - placing children from other states, and
  - identifying new child welfare cases and providing services.
- develop and provide training to states on child welfare disaster planning.

# Appendix II: Components of State Disaster Plans

State	State Plan Components								
	Identify children who may be dispersed	Identify caseworkers who may be dispersed	Continue services to children who may be dispersed	Preserve essential case information	Coordinate services within state	Coordinate services outside state	Place children from other states	Provide in-home family services	Identify new child welfare cases
Alabama									
Arkansas				X					
District of Columbia		X	X	X	X				
Georgia	X	X	X	X	X	X			X
Iowa	X	X	X	X					X
Idaho	X	X	X	X	X				X
Illinois	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kansas				X	X	X			
Montana	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Nevada		X	X	X					
North Carolina	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
North Dakota	X	X		X		X			X
Oregon	X	X	X	X	X				X
Rhode Island				X	X	X			
South Carolina	X		X	X	X				
Tennessee									
Texas	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Utah	X		X	X	X				X
Virginia	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Washington	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Wisconsin				X					

Source: Analysis of GAO national survey of state child welfare systems challenges.

# Appendix III: States Experiencing Disasters in 2005

**Table 1: States Reporting Having Disaster Plans**

State	Type of disaster	Month
Alabama	Hurricane Dennis	July
	Hurricane Katrina	August
Idaho	Heavy rains, flooding	July
Kansas	Severe winter storms, heavy rains, flooding	February
	Severe storms, flooding	August
	Severe storms, flooding	November
Nevada	Heavy rains, flooding	March
North Carolina	Hurricane Ophelia	October
North Dakota	Severe storms, flooding, ground saturation	July
	Severe winter storms and record/near-record snow	November
Texas	Hurricane Rita	September
Utah	Severe storms, flooding	February
	Flood, landslide	August

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency 2005 federally declared disaster data at <http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema?year=2005>

**Table 2: States Not Reporting Having Disaster Plans**

State	Type of disaster	Month
Alaska	Severe winter storm	March
	Severe fall storm, tidal surges, flooding	December
Arizona	Severe storms, flooding	February
	Severe storms, flooding	April
California	Severe storms, flooding, debris flows, mudslides	February
	Severe storms, flooding, landslides, mud and debris flows	April
Connecticut	Severe storms, flooding	December
Florida	Hurricane Dennis	July
	Hurricane Katrina	August
	Hurricane Wilma	October
Hawaii	Severe storms, flash flooding	February
Indiana	Severe winter storms, flooding	January
	Tornado, severe storms	November
Kentucky	Severe winter storm, record snow	February
	Severe storms, tornadoes	December

**Appendix III: States Experiencing Disasters  
in 2005**

<b>State</b>	<b>Type of disaster</b>	<b>Month</b>
Louisiana	Tropical storm Cindy	August
	Hurricane Katrina	August
	Hurricane Rita	September
Maine	Severe storms, flooding, snow jams, ice melts	June
Massachusetts	Severe storms, flooding	November
Mississippi	Hurricane Dennis	July
	Hurricane Katrina	August
New Hampshire	Severe storms, flooding	October
Nebraska	Severe storms, flooding	June
New Jersey	Severe storms, flooding	April
New York	Severe storms, flooding	April
Ohio	Severe winter storms, flooding, mudslides	February
Pennsylvania	Severe storms, flooding	April
Puerto Rico	Severe storms, flooding, landslides, mudslides	November
South Dakota	Severe storm	July
	Severe winter storm	December
West Virginia	Severe storms, flooding, landslides	February
Wyoming	Tornado	August

Source: GAO analysis of Federal Emergency Management Agency 2005 federally declared disaster data at <http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema?year=2005>.

# Appendix IV: Comments from the Department of Health and Human Services



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Inspector General

Washington, D.C. 20201

JUL 21 2006

Ms. Cornelia M. Ashby  
Director, Education, Workforce,  
And Income Security Issues  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Ashby:

Enclosed are the Department's comments on the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report entitled, "CHILD WELFARE: Federal Action Needed to Ensure States Have Plans to Safeguard Children in the Child Welfare System Displaced by Disasters" (GAO-06-944), before its publication. These comments represent the tentative position of the Department and are subject to reevaluation when the final version of this report is received.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on this draft report before its publication.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Daniel R. Levinson".

Daniel R. Levinson  
Inspector General

Enclosure

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) is transmitting the Department's response to this draft report in our capacity as the Department's designated focal point and coordinator for U.S. Government Accountability Office reports. OIG has not conducted an independent assessment of these comments and therefore expresses no opinion on them.



**COMMENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES ON  
THE U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE'S DRAFT REPORT  
ENTITLED, "CHILD WELFARE: FEDERAL ACTION NEEDED TO ENSURE  
STATES HAVE PLANS TO SAFEGUARD CHILDREN IN THE CHILD WELFARE  
SYSTEM DISPLACED BY DISASTERS" (GAO-06-944)**

The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) draft report, which addresses the need for States to have in place disaster plans that address child welfare system issues.

**GAO Recommendations**

*To better assist states in developing child welfare disaster plans, we are recommending that the Secretary of Health and Human Services ensure that the department's child welfare disaster planning guidance address the dispersion of children and families within and across state lines. This guidance should include information on*

- *preserving child welfare records,*
- *identifying children who may be dispersed,*
- *identifying new child welfare cases and providing services*
- *coordinating services and sharing information with other states, and*
- *placing children from other states.*

*Finally, we are recommending that the Secretary develop and provide training on child welfare disaster planning to all states.*

**HHS Comments**

This report provides an overview of the status of child welfare disaster planning by States. GAO's major concern appears to be that many States do not have child welfare disaster plans in place, and when they do, the plans do not always address the dispersion of children and families that can occur. GAO concluded that, in the absence of Federal requirements that States develop child welfare disaster plans, many States have not done so.

The report identifies a number of actions that HHS is taking to assist States with child welfare disaster planning, including convening a national conference on this issue in August 2006, updating the 1995 guide for child welfare disaster planning, and providing training and technical assistance through the network of national resource centers. In addition, HHS is asking its regional offices to work with States to voluntarily submit their disaster plans for review.

As the report notes, there is no Federal requirement that States develop child welfare disaster plans. Therefore, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is encouraging States to address this issue through training and technical assistance. The 1995 child welfare disaster planning guide is being updated and the information GAO recommends has already been included in the revision. Training on disaster planning is being provided to all States, both at the

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**Appendix IV: Comments from the Department  
of Health and Human Services**

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national child welfare disaster summit being held in August 2006 and through the network of national child welfare resource centers. ACF's regional offices are working with States to encourage the development of child welfare disaster plans and to submit those plans for review.

The report and letter should be modified to clearly indicate that the focus of the review is on programmatic Disaster Recovery Plans (DRP) rather than on information technology DRPs. ACF maintains that States have information technology-related DRPs for their automated systems and those plans do, in fact, address the need for preserving essential information recorded in the electronic case record.

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# Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Cornelia M. Ashby, (202)512-7215, ashbyc@gao.gov

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## Staff Acknowledgments

Cindy Ayers (Assistant Director) and Arthur T. Merriam Jr. (Analyst-in-Charge) managed all aspects of the assignment. Wayne Sylvia, Mark E. Ward, Christopher T. Langford, and Kathleen Boggs made significant contributions to this report, in all aspects of the work. In addition, Carolyn Boyce provided technical support, James Rebbe provided legal support, and Charles Willson assisted in the message and report development.

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# Appendix VI: Related GAO Products

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*Lessons Learned for Protecting and Educating Children after the Gulf Coast Hurricanes*, [GAO-06-680R](#), Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2006.

*Hurricanes Katrina: GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness, Response, and Recovery*, [GAO-06-442T](#), Washington, D.C.: March 8, 2006.

*Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Provisions of Charitable Assistance*, [GAO-06-297T](#), Washington, D.C.: December 13, 2005.

*September 11: More Effective Collaboration Could Enhance Charitable Organizations' Contributions in Disasters*, [GAO-03-259](#), Washington, D.C.: December 19, 2002.

*Disaster Management: Improving the Nation's Response to Catastrophic Disasters*, [RCED-93-186](#), Washington, D.C.: July 23, 1993.

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