

**TESTIMONY OF PEARLIE HARDIN ELLOIE,
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**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY AND
SECONDARY EDUCATION OF
THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Pearlie Hardin Elloie, the Head Start Director of the Total Community Action Head Start program in New Orleans, LA. I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify today on the current plight of low-income children and families in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

From March 2005 through the end of July, 2005, the New Orleans Head Start Program pre-registered 2618 three and four year old children and 204 infants and toddlers in its 34 Head Start centers and eight (8) family day care homes for the 2005-2006 program year that was to open for children on Tuesday, September 6, 2005. On Monday, August 22nd, staff returned to work following the annual vacation period. On Friday, August 26th and Saturday, August 27th, staff delivered supplies to the Park Plaza Hotel in preparation for the annual Pre-service Training Program. That same weekend, thousands of citizens fled the city. On Monday, August 29th Hurricane Katrina passed over the city of New Orleans. The power of this hurricane caused major breaches in three levees – flooding 80% of the city. What happened after this massive flooding was a nightmare that shook the nation.

The weekend before Katrina hit more than 250,000 persons packed their belongings for what they thought would be a three-day period. Sadly, thousands of New Orleanians remained in their homes and more than 20,000 people fled to the Superdome and the Convention Center. I am often asked why these individuals and families did not try to escape hurricane Katrina. The answer is simple; thousands of persons did not leave because they did not have transportation. These families did not have cars nor did they have sufficient available funds or credit cards to book hotel accommodations. Generations of these families lived within blocks of each other in New Orleans. They had no contacts in other places. These families had no other choice; they were simply trapped and couldn't escape

The events of this fatal weekend began a journey of fear, despair, and destruction for much of the city's population, particularly impoverished individuals and families who, even before Katrina, lived on the edge of existence. In the haste of transporting individuals and families from the Superdome and the Convention Center children were separated from their families, families were separated and elderly couples were separated. Many persons boarded air craft unaware of their destinations – landing in places completely unfamiliar to them. Our city, our people and our Head Start Program were in shambles – buildings destroyed, staff and Head Start families evacuated

to places throughout the nation, lives lost, homes destroyed, vital records and family historical documents destroyed and, most devastating, the lost of a sense of community; we felt like strangers in our own homeland.

Head Start As A First Responder

Despite our feelings of personal and community lost, the Head Start grantee staff moved into action. We immediately opened offices in Baton Rouge, La staffed by three persons – the Executive Director, the comptroller and me, the Head Start Director.

Head Start was uniquely qualified to take on this mission. Our program deals with families in crisis on a continuous basis year round. Our organization serves as a source of information and assistance to hundreds of families. Our networks are wide ranging and we have partnerships across the city to assure a seamless service delivery system. We are there for families to turn to for advice and counsel in times of sorrow and need. I am proud to say that Head Start is the ultimate first responder. We were there for our families from day one and we continue to be there for them today. Much of what was accomplished within the first few months following Katrina could not have happened without Head Start. In this time of critical need, our families turned to us for comfort, support, information and assistance and we were there for them. This effective rapid response could only have been done by Head Start and we did it well.

Immediately following the opening of our Baton Rouge office we focused on the following tasks to ensure we could quickly get services to children and their families:

- Locating and making contact with 323 displaced Head Start employees
- Assisting employees in adjusting to their new locations by 1) referring them for employment in Head Start programs throughout the country; and 2) assisting them in contacting their displaced coworkers
- Assessing damage to Head Start facilities
- Devising plan to bring centers back into operation
- Reopening New Orleans office
- Assisting staff in their return to New Orleans
- Keeping funding source apprized of rebuilding of the Head Start Program
- Using data from multiple sources to develop the organization's Response to Crisis.
- Contacting Head Start programs in Region VI and Region IV seeking their assistance in locating staff and Head Start families
- Obtaining commitment from these programs to serve displaced New Orleans Head Start families
- Serving as a point of contact for Head Start families and staff in their effort to locate family members

Head Start Buildings Damaged

In order to accomplish the goal of reopening a Head Start center before November 15th, we had to be in the city. So, in late September I went home for the first time since Katrina. It is very hard for me to find the precise words that describe the New Orleans I saw. The best that I can tell you was that large parts of the city were completely devastated. For more than two weeks parts of New Orleans had languished in three to more than ten feet of stagnant flood water. Trash and debris were everywhere. Buildings were completely destroyed. Abandoned cars covered neutral

grounds and the areas under overpasses and elevated roadways. The city was very dark and desolate. There were no lights, no people moving about, no dogs roaming the streets, no birds, no butterflies, and most sadly, no children playing. Where there was once green landscape, now everything was brown. Gnats and flies swarmed freely. The stench was terrible and sickening.

An assessment of the 34 Head Start centers revealed the following:

1. eleven centers sustained minimal damage
2. five centers sustained damage due to rising water and substantial water damage due to severe roof damage
3. thirteen centers sustained severe damage due to flooding and wind damage
4. five centers required tear down and rebuild
5. eight family day care homes sustained severe damage

We now faced the loss of two-thirds of our facilities, a city still reeling from the shock of Katrina, displaced staff and Head Start families already beginning to return to New Orleans. The program attempted to stay one step ahead of returning Head Start families; we wanted Head Start to be in place when families returned. These early returning families were coming back to New Orleans primarily because of job demand. We had to have safe and nurturing environments for these children who had just experienced so many traumas. The program implemented its Head Start Redevelopment Plan focusing on those eleven centers that sustained minimal damage. On November 14, 2005 the first Head Start center, Diana H S center, was reopened. Within six months seven additional centers were opened. The other three facilities were lost to Head Start when owners did not renew leases.

After the Hurricane: Low Income Children and Families Still Suffering

The misery from hurricane Katrina is wide-spread and to this day continues to impact the city's quality of life. What is life in New Orleans like in February, 2007? The 2005 American Community Survey listed the population of Orleans Parish as 437,186 - down from the 467,033 count in Census 2000. The 2006 Louisiana Health and Population Survey conducted by the Louisiana Public Health Institute on behalf of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals and the Louisiana Recovery Authority indicated that New Orleans' population as of August, 2006 was 191,139 – up from the 158,353 count for January, 2006.

The city's health care system has been devastated. Many hospitals were destroyed in the storm and have not yet reopened. The largest public hospital where many Head Start families received health care, especially emergency health care, remains closed. Neighborhood health clinics have not reopened, and tragically, mental health services are almost non-existent.

About half of the families we serve are currently living in trailers or are living with other families – often three families living in a two bedroom apartment. Affordable housing is our biggest challenge. Large sections of public housing developments remain closed; some scheduled for demolition. Low-rent housing is a thing of the past. Only a limited number of apartments and houses are available for rent. This had led some landlords in the area to increase rent 75% or more. An apartment that may have cost \$500 per month before Katrina may now cost about \$1200. This is way out of the reach of the families that Head Start serves and other low income individuals and families.

Jobs are very limited for Head Start families. Many of our families are employed in the service industry - working at local hotels, restaurants, and other service industries. And while they might earn \$8 to \$10 per hour, these jobs often do not provide benefits to their employees.

The children we serve in Head Start have very much been impacted by the storm. We are finding that children are clinging to their mothers a bit more. They are experiencing more anxiety and are scared that something may happen to them. We try to counteract that by providing them a safe and positive environment. We also work with our teachers to help them identify children who may need extra help. We have engaged the assistance of mental health professionals in this initiative.

The public transportation system has been damaged. Bus lines have been drastically cut or eliminated, the number of buses online is reduced and buses are not running as regularly as they did before hurricane Katrina. This means that it is harder for low income families to get work and to get around. The cost of riding the bus which is \$1.25 a person each way can be very expensive for families with 2 or 3 children and a low paying job.

Immediately following hurricane Katrina our Head Start program spent a considerable amount of time finding services for displaced families and their children. Today, many of the same problems exist more than a year later. Families still need affordable housing, assistance in replacing lost documents, schools for their school-age children, and referrals for other social service needs. Head Start is still here for these families.

Lessons Learned

Head Start staff and families learned hard lessons as a result of Hurricane Katrina. What happened after Katrina changed forever the approach we use in moving families toward self-sufficiency. We are resolved that Head Start families and staff will never again face such an emergency unprepared. Head Start developed a plan of action geared toward ensuring that families and staff are prepared to swiftly move their families to safety in the event of another emergency. The objective of the plan was to provide information to families so that they have both the knowledge and the resources to make informed decisions that ensure the safety of their families in the event of an emergency. Critical components of the plan are 1) assisting families in developing an emergency preparedness plan. Each family received a copy of the DVD entitled "Preparing for The Big One." This DVD, which provides information and instructions on how one can prepare for a hurricane, was developed by Total Community Action, Inc., the Head Start grantee. The irony is that the distribution of this DVD was scheduled to begin on August 29, 2005, the day Katrina passed over New Orleans; 2) encouraging Head Start families to maintain contact with individuals, families and others who provided a safe harbor for them following Katrina. This is especially critical for those families who do not have distant friends and relatives that could assist them in an emergency; 3) soliciting the assistance of other Head Start Programs in Regions VI and IV in the event Head Start families were to be evacuated to their communities. Head Start programs in other communities were the first contacts many families and staff made when they evacuated to a community where they did not have family or friends; and 4) giving special emphasis to employing strategies that have proven effective in helping individuals and families move permanently out of poverty.

The vast majority of individuals and families that did not evacuate the city in advance of Hurricane Katrina were poor persons, those who had no resources to take them to safe harbor. Additional, many of those families experienced generational poverty - not one generation had been successful in freeing itself from the shackles of poverty. Again, Total Community Action, Inc., the Head Start grantee, provided leadership in this effort. The Agency had developed its Eight Point Poverty Reduction Plan geared to assisting individuals and families move permanently out of poverty. The plan presents eight asset building strategies that have proven to be effective poverty reduction strategies in communities throughout the nation where they have been employed.

The Head Start program has given emphasis to two of these strategies: Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Individual Development Account (IDA). The EITC program reduces a low income wage earners' tax liability and provides the individual a tax refund, if eligible. It has been documented that the EITC program is one of the largest anti-poverty programs in America. The IDA program is a forced saving program for low-income individuals and families that provides opportunity for persons to save income to acquire an asset such as a first time home, start a small business or to pursue post high school educational opportunities. Shortly before Katrina passed over New Orleans a young Head Start family moved into its first home, acquired through its participation in IDA program.

The last critical piece of this plan is implementation of a Financial Literacy Program geared to increasing the individual's and family's skills in acquiring and maintaining financial stability, learning how to make better use of family income, whatever it may be.

The hope of this initiative is to assist Head Start families create and implement action plans that move them permanently out of poverty. It is an awesome task, but I believe that Head Start is up to the task.

Recommendations

The situation, however while much improved, is still dismal in New Orleans. We are in need of help and we need it now! Low-income children and families can no longer afford to wait. As Congress moves forward on how to rebuild the gulf region let me give you some thoughts based on what I see everyday and how I think you can help:

- There is an incredible lack of affordable housing for low-income children and families. This is taking a terrible toll on the parents we serve and their children. We need to find a way to ensure a stable housing situation for all of the families who need help in New Orleans. This means we need to rebuild public housing complexes and provide more funding for section 8 housing vouchers and get them out quickly to people.
- Head Start programs need more flexibility in providing services. We are finding that post-Katrina there is an incredible need for infant and toddler care. I believe that the Head Start reauthorization should provide Head Start programs the flexibility to convert their slots downward to serve more infants and toddlers if the need is there. I also believe that the income guidelines for Head Start should be raised as well. Many families are working, but because of the lack of affordable housing, more of their salaries are going to pay for a place to live. They might make more than they did before Katrina, but the cost of living is much greater. These families need and deserve our help.

- We need immediate help in getting our buildings and facilities cleaned up, rebuilt and renovated. We are now more than a year later and we do not have the necessary safe spaces to serve additional low income children and their families.

It was my intent to share with you the status of Head Start families after the storm. Much of what I have shared with you may have been seen on your evening news. True, we do have challenges of high crime rates, insufficient housing, a slowly rebuilding infrastructure, a wounded health care system and a broken public education system. However, what you may not have seen or witnessed is the spirit of hope in our citizens, we have returned home to the city we love and we are confident that like the mythical bird, the phoenix, we can rise from the devastation of Katrina and build a better New Orleans.

Head Start can continue to be a beacon of hope, information and resource to eligible families. We must continue to be a viable part of the recovery of our beloved city.

I hope that my testimony was helpful to you in understanding the impact of hurricane Katrina on low income children and families. I urge all of you to come to New Orleans and visit our Head Start program and see the situation for yourself. I would be happy to answer any questions.