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Release No.08-09-46

Aug. 29, 2008

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News Release

USU Director of Research, Education Releases Study on Health Care Needs of Persons Displaced by Hurricane Katrina

BETHESDA, Md. — Lynn Lawry, MD, MSPH, MSc, director of research and education with the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences' (USU) Center for Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Medicine (CDHAM), is the senior author of a manuscript titled, "Health Assessment and Health Care Access Among Internally Displaced Persons in Mississippi Travel Trailer Parks Two Years after The 2005 Gulf Coast Hurricane Season." The article was published in the *Journal of Health Affairs*, Aug. 29, as a health affairs web exclusive.

The health care needs of persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina remaining in travel trailer parks had not been evaluated. Dr. Lawry and other researchers conducted a population-based assessment of health care access of travel trailer park residents in Mississippi. Their findings indicate a worsening of chronic disease, mental illness, and barriers to health care access since displacement. Meeting both the chronic disease and mental health needs of persons displaced by this disaster is essential for ensuring recovery.

The survey, in part, looks at the health status of Katrina evacuees who are presently displaced, revealing a mismatch between a short-term emergency planning approach and the long-term health requirements of IDPs.

"For the health needs of IDPs to be met, government (state and federal) and relief agencies need to ensure continuity of health coverage in the aftermath of a disaster, and develop long-term plans to address both chronic disease and mental health needs beyond the emergency response," explains authors Lynn Lawry, Nadine Shehab and Michael Anastario.

Researchers interviewed members of a random sampling of the 17,788 IPD households living in FEMA trailers in Mississippi, over a two-week period in September 2007. At least one adult in their household had a chronic condition, according to four fifths of the survey respondents, and almost six in ten (58 percent) reported the condition was worsening. Fifty-eight percent of those interviewed reported that at least one child in the household had a chronic condition, and 68 percent of those respondents said it was getting worse. Nearly six in ten (57 percent) of those interviewed met the criteria for major depressive disorder, and nearly seven in ten (72 percent) reported symptoms of depression.

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Learning to Care for Those in Harm's Way

Even as the needs of these populations increase, the health resources available to IDPs have decreased. Less than half (48.7 percent) of those interviewed, reported having health insurance, a drop of ten percentage points of those having coverage before the storm.

Lawry and coauthors are calling for federal legislation to ensure health care coverage for IDPs, through Medicaid extensions or via a special emergency fund for the states. The researchers also champion the use of temporary mobile medical units and other methods that serve to meet the ongoing health care needs of IDPs. Additionally, the authors encourage the federal government fund long-term mental health services for IDPs. Current legislation mandates funding connected to disasters be used only for crisis management, despite rates of suicide and suicide attempts among IDPs being nearly four times higher than the baseline rates for Mississippi.

The Uniformed Services University is located on the grounds of Bethesda's National Naval Medical Center and across from the National Institutes of Health. It is the nation's federal school of medicine and graduate school of nursing. The university educates health care professionals dedicated to career service in the Department of Defense and the U.S. Public Health Service. Students are active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service, who are being educated to deal with wartime casualties, national disasters, emerging infectious diseases, and other public health emergencies. Of the university's more than 4,200 physician alumni, the vast majority serve on active duty and are supporting operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, offering their leadership and expertise.

For more information, contact the Office of External Affairs at 301-295-1219.