

Executive Summary:

Children’s Health Care Needs in a Pandemic, Disaster or Public Health Emergency: A National Blueprint for Pediatric-Specific Readiness



Ensuring that the unique physical and mental health needs of children – who represent some 25% of the total U.S. population – are met during a pandemic, natural disaster, or other public health event must be a national priority.

Children are not little adults. Disruptions in children’s care, trauma, social isolation, food and housing insecurity, and grief associated with a natural disaster or pandemic can have a significant negative impact on their mental and physical health and their long-term well-being. Pediatric care typically requires extra time, monitoring, specialized medications and equipment, and specially trained health care providers. Children’s hospitals’ critical care and “surge” capacity is limited during a pandemic or natural disaster, adding a significant level of complexity to the nation’s capacity to meet children’s needs.

In recent years, children’s hospitals have experienced an unprecedented level of pediatric patient visits driven by a substantial increase in childhood respiratory illnesses like respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), influenza and COVID-19, on top of the ongoing children’s mental health crisis. The challenges that confronted children’s hospitals demonstrate how critical it is that **the nation’s pandemic preparedness system can appropriately account for differences between the way physical and mental health care delivery and support systems are structured for children compared with adults.**

The Children’s Hospital Association (CHA) prepared this Blueprint to help policymakers prioritize pediatric needs in a pandemic, disaster, or emergency situation. It provides important on-the-ground insights and policy recommendations from experts in pediatric pandemic and disaster preparedness, which were provided in response to a May 2023 survey developed in partnership with FTI Consulting and completed by over 40 CHA member hospitals and other sources.

The following policy actions will strengthen the nation’s pandemic and emergency response framework to meet children’s unique physical and mental health care needs.

- **Strengthen the national pediatric disaster and pandemic response infrastructure.**
A pandemic and disaster relief preparedness framework must invest in resources that strengthen pediatric medical preparedness and response systems and programs. Policymakers must ensure that every hospital, including non-pediatric hospitals, has sufficient capacity to continue providing critical pediatric services during a national disaster or pandemic.
- **Invest in the growth of the pediatric workforce to prevent future shortages.**
Investments must be made to address current and long-term pediatric workforce challenges, including the pediatric emergency response workforce. In particular, the Medical Reserve Corps should be equipped to fill critical pediatric workforce needs during a pandemic or natural disaster.
- **Bolster access to pediatric medical supplies within the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) and rapid medical countermeasure (MCM) response.**
The MCM response system and the SNS must have processes in place to respond rapidly and transparently to pediatric needs during the next public health emergency. In particular, the SNS should be required to include emergency medications in age-appropriate delivery formulations, equipment and related supplies that meet children’s needs.
- **Ensure timely access to pediatric mental health care during pandemics, disasters, and public health emergencies.**
Policymakers must address the mental health needs of children and youth during public health emergencies and disasters, including the development of a national strategy to support continued access to, and availability of, mental health and substance use disorder services.

The nation’s pandemic preparedness and disaster response infrastructure must address the differences between the way health care delivery and support systems are structured for children compared with adults. We urge the federal government to use the learnings identified in this Blueprint to inform the development of a national disaster and pandemic response infrastructure that meets the unique physical, mental, developmental, and social needs of all children.