

Breastfeeding and emergencies: what we learned from WBW 2009

Breakfast Table Topic by USBC Task Force on Emergency Preparedness

USBC Coalitions Conference 2010

When the topic of emergency preparedness was announced for World Breastfeeding Week 2009, USBC took it to heart. Working with USBC member organizations, we developed a one-page handout and posted it on the USBC website.

Through a personal contact, we were able to invite Jackie Snelling, a representative from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to visit our meeting in August. FEMA also recommended that we get in touch with the National Commission on Children in Disasters (NCCD), so we invited Vicki Johnson from NCCD.

We have learned some **basic information about emergencies**. There are three phases of emergency response: planning, rescue/response, recovery. When you think of a disaster, you commonly think of the event itself—the earthquake, the hurricane, the power failure, the flood—and the people who need help. But before the help can come, there needs to be a plan, with supplies purchased and stockpiled, with people trained and organized to respond, and with a chain of command agreed and clearly understood. That's the **Planning**.

Response includes several phases, including rescue, evacuation, and sheltering. For breastfeeding, our main concern is sheltering. We want to know there are accommodations for pregnant women near term and for breastfeeding mothers, who need a nursing corner where they can have privacy and a chance to support each other. They need support and extra water, but not much else in the way of supplies. We want the people who run shelters to have basic information about breastfeeding protection and support, even in the midst of providing safe formula feeding for the babies who have no access to human milk.

The final phase, **Recovery**, is the clean-up and re-building phase. It can last for years. Look at the example of Hurricane Katrina. Mother support for sustained breastfeeding has a role in recovery.

Here's what we learned from the **FEMA presentation**:

1. Emergency response and planning happen primarily at the state and local level. This is the best place for individuals or state and local groups to get involved.
2. It is imperative to get involved BEFORE the disaster. This means that we must seek out the local people in charge of preparedness and volunteer to get trained. Whatever each of us can do on behalf of breastfeeding will be accomplished within the context of providing care and shelter for women and children in general.
3. FEMA runs more than 2,000 Citizen Corps groups around the country, and they would love any of us to volunteer. <http://www.citizencorps.gov/>

4. We hope that this strategy, making connections at the local level, will lead to opportunities to get involved in training.

The **National Commission on Children and Disasters** (NCCD) operates under a mandate from Congress in the Kids in Disasters Well-being, Safety and Health Act of 2007. The Commission has two years (ending October 2010) to study and report on the needs of children (0-18 years of age) relating to preparation for, response to, and recovery from emergencies. The goal is to eliminate duplication and presumably to find and close gaps in coverage. At the end of their first year, NCCD issued an Interim Report. Visit <http://www.childrenanddisasters.acf.hhs.gov/>

In October 2009, when NCCD delivered their Interim Report to the White House, Mark Shriver, NCCD Chair, and Craig Fugate, FEMA administrator, spoke at the National Press Club luncheon and answered questions from the press. You can watch the informative, hour-long program at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/id/213391>

USBC has had several contacts with NCCD. Geri Fitzgerald has been attending their meetings since September 2009 as the official rep from NAPNAP, She is now a member of NCCD's Pediatric Medical Care sub-committee. NCCD's Interim Report mentions the need to set up a nursing corner in shelters. However, there was nothing in the report about a) the need to **protect, promote, and support breastfeeding** as an integral part of emergency response or b) a call for training health workers and shelter volunteers to meet this need.

Basically USBC's strategy for NCCD is to continue showing up, because when we show up, they remember about breastfeeding. This is the strategy we recommend for involvement at the state and local levels as well.

Here is a link to a list of emergency response organizations: www.disastercenter.com/agency.htm

For international organizations concerned with disaster relief, this site has a great chart:

www.faqs.org/nutrition/Diab-Em/Disaster-Relief-Organizations.html