Head Start Helps Families and Communities in Crisis: Hurricane Katrina

(links for viewing and download at end of transcript)

[Music] JUDY LOYDE: August 29th was a scary day -- changed the lives of everyone in southeast Louisiana, Mississippi gulf coast. We don't really think it's going to ever be exactly the way it was; and for some people, it's not even going to be close. PEARLIE H. ELLOIE: You cannot -- you cannot even... I can't tell in words what Katrina did to people. We're still going through it. There are no services. There are no drug stores; there are no gas stations. There are no schools for children in all of Orleans Parish. Katrina has turned our lives upside down. CHILDREN: ♪ The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out. Out came the sun and dried up all the rain; so the itsy-bitsy spider climbed the spout again. ♪ Yay! [Clapping] TRENICE LEWIS: A nightmare... We slept under a bridge. My five years old -- all us -- all my eight children slept under a bridge. We slept there three days. And from the Ninth -- Ninth Ward, they had -- bringing live bodies and they was bringing dead bodies. And my five years old was up and he saw everything. GWENDOLYN WASHINGTON: When they were saying that we really should, like, mandatorily evacuate, I was like, "Oh, maybe it's going to be like the other times. We'll be back in a day or two, or whatever." So, I really didn't take it seriously. And I think maybe the day before it actually hit, we came to our senses and a bunch of us -- my side of the family, my husband's -- we all caravanned out to Texas. When we were out there, my son, he was just -- I could tell he really felt displaced. And sometimes people think that children, "Oh, they'll be okay," you know. The parents stress out, but the children will be okay. But that's not true. I know that for a fact. He would actually cry, I want to say, like, every other day, like "I want to go home. I want to go home." It was almost heartbreaking. ROBIN SIRGO: This picture here is a picture of my house the day after the storm. My husband actually took this picture from his boat. He was riding around in his boat; they were pulling people off of -- off of their houses, bringing them to the courthouse and everything, which was shipping them to the -- the Algiers Point ferry. And they were taking the ferry across and being put on buses and shipped to nowhere. They don't -- they didn't even know. I mean, they were being brought to Baton Rouge; they were being brought to Texas. And they were lucky enough to get to Baton Rouge once they got out on that Thursday. But -- we had received close to 12.5 feet of water in our houses, and it took 10 days for it to go out. RAYANN McGEE: When the storm actually came, of course we were out of lights for almost a month. And we had no idea what our house looked like until we were able to go back like a couple weeks later to go and reassess everything. When we got back we had structural damage. Everything was molded, and water damage everywhere. ARKEBIA MATTHEWS: I was there during the entire process. I'm still there in New Orleans. I was able to evacuate to the airport. From there, we were airlifted to Memphis, Tennessee. JAMES EVANS, JR: We're -- we're in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. We're at the St. Philip Head Start Center that served 100 preschool-aged children. Majority of the children reside in this immediate area. And we're standing here, and we're looking at what's -- what's left of the facility. It's totally demolished in terms of internally that has to be totally just repaired -- actually, torn down and rebuilt. The people -- there aren't anyone living in this area because of the conditions of the houses that you see around us. The families are scared -- are scattered about the country in -- in nearly all 50 states. I've never heard it this quiet. At this time of day, you normally would have the children out on the yard playing, interacting with each other and interacting with the staff, the neighbors. A lot of the seniors would be sitting out on the porch enjoying the day, just watching the children. A lot of just traffic passing back and forth. You don't have that. In the classrooms you'd hear music the children interacting, again, with each other. And again, this is just totally devastated -- this area as well as the entire community. [Music] WOMAN 1: And Miss [Inaudible], I look forward to working with you this year. Thank you. WOMAN 2: Thank you, I appreciate it. WOMAN 3: Oh, it's beginning to smell like Head Start. [Laughter] PEARLIE: I had people beginning to call me from all across this region: "When are you going back? When is Head Start going to reopen?" That meant that they were getting ready to come back home. I am determined that Head Start is going to remain strong in this community. I am determined that nothing will destroy this program. I am determined that we will have more quality than we ever had before. And I think the kind of determination that I have, the people that I work with also have. And that's what keeps you going. TEACHER: "'Then I'll do it myself,' said the little red hen. And she did." PEARLIE: For a while we're going to be a smaller Head Start, but we're going to be a better Head Start. MAXINE MARSHALL: This center here will be the first Head Start program that will open for Total Community Action. This Head Start will set the tone for the other centers that will come immediately after this one. Because once we set this center up, we will proceed on to the next Head Start center, making sure that children receive a good beginning. IIONA LASTRAP: We need Head Start because a lot of our parents needs to get stable back in there. And the children need to be stable, and

the parents need to be stable. And right now, Head Start is taking some of the burden of off us. TRENICE: Oh, I love it. I'm glad it's open. CHARLOTTE PROVENZA: The families are -- a lot of the families are leaving early in the morning and being driven in to New Orleans to work -- or working on their own homes and they're working for the jobs that they have. NEIL BORIS: I got a good call this morning from Save the Children. They've put a few million dollars into early childhood programs in Mississippi. They are interested in teaming up with our already expansive team to meet unmet needs. CHARLOTTE: The group today of everyone around that table are all part of our community partners that we have all gotten together starting the second day after -- Tuesday after Katrina, that -- and to see what we can all do to help families and children, prenatal through. MIKE TUCKER: My agency basically coordinates services for -- for families -- for all families within the East Baton Rouge Parish community. So as a result of Hurricane Katrina, we have been brought to the table to coordinate those efforts for families who -- who may go into the Early Head Start program for child care, but they need so many more services. So we're there providing those pieces for those families to reconnect and -- and -- and put their lives back together again. NEIL: The power of it really is that it's a community collaboration that immediately -- and I mean days after the storm -- said, "We've got to come together and we've got to expand services for families." SUSAN JOHNSTON: Head Start has been right out there. I mean, they've been first responders. They know their children and families. They know the community resources; they access those resources. In almost every community within our region where families came in to, they grantees were right there. [Knocking] CHARLOTTE: Tiffany. TIFFANY: Hey CHARLOTTE: Hey. How are you? TIFFANY: Fine. CHARLOTTE: It's freezing cold. TIFFANY: I know. CHARLOTTE: It's good to see you. Tiffany is this great mom that I first met when she was in a church shelter. She has four children. We -- I met with her to see what needs she would have and how she was doing. And really just whenever we went to any shelter or anyplace and -- and talked to anybody, it was just mainly to start listening. She said, "I'm ready, let's go. I'm ready, let's go to Head Start." Her three children are now -- and have been for a long time -- we've been providing the child care and support services off-site, which is at this program at the Art Day School. And her oldest child is -- is going to Head Start. So it just kind of shows how you can weave the fabric, you know, and -- and show how we can support and have supported Tiffany in all of her -- her transitions. And she -- and wanting her to be -- and -- and her goals, which were to be employed and to have her children in quality care services. And we're glad that we were there to help here and to work for her in her goals for her babies and herself and her family. CAROL BURNETT: This property was submerged in water. The exterior walls look like they're okay, but they were under water literally to the roof for over six hours. And so, the interior is completely ruined. The waters began rising, and first the shed was submerged. And he went up to the roof and the whole home was submerged, and he ended up having to float out on a piece of debris. And he ended up in the tree above our building and then was able to land on the highest part of that roof, where he stayed for over six hours before the waters receded and he could get down. BOY 1: Katrina! TEACHER: Katrina, that's right. Does anybody remember what happened when Katrina came? CHILDREN: Yeah. TEACHER: What happened? BOY 1: The wind blowed. TEACHER: The wind blew. That's right. MARY STEWART BOULWARE: We listen to the children and we kind of gauge by what they say, the things that we hear. GIRL 1: My maw-maw's house blew down. TEACHER: Your maw-maw's house blew down? GIRL 1: All of it did. All the parts did. TEACHER: All the parts of the house blew down? BOY 2: [Inaudible]TEACHER: Well, how did that make you feel? BOY 1: Sad. TEACHER: It did? Why did that make you feel sad? BOY 1: Because of the hurricane. MARY: If they're talking about the wind or if they're afraid of the wind, or they might be playing in the blocks and they might be crashing things around, we listen and then we talk with the parent later if -- and offer any counseling. JUDY: You occasionally see the child who's really been impacted, like the one who carries a flashlight every day -- a little flashlight -- and he puts it down in his shoe. And his mother says he won't go anywhere without it because the power was out for so long and he -- he's afraid the lights are going to go out again. LINDA HARVEY-IRVIN: This is the A.E. Perkins Head Start Center. It houses 240 children, 12 classrooms, several offices, several restroom facilities, and a state-of-the-art kitchen. Well, our hopes are to -- to rebuild and to begin the rebuilding process as soon as possible. We have some great volunteers here. We want to for all that you're doing. VOLUNTEER: Well, thank you all for having us. [Sounds of construction] [Inaudible]LINDA: It is we who are indebted to you. It's extremely overwhelming. It's massive. It's worse, of course, right along the shoreline. But as you move northward away from the shoreline, it's still so overwhelming. We've been very concerned about our Head Start children. I've had one parent to say to me, "I've got a three-year-old who really needs to get back because she's afraid that Head Start went away because she did something bad." And of course, we need to explain to her that that just isn't how it happened. This is the Turkey Creek Head Start Center. This building has some historical value for all the neighbors in this community. It's an old, old school. As a matter of fact, the lady who is the center manager here went to high school here. This was one of our hardest hit centers. It flooded about to my height in this building. This was the center manager's office. And as you can see there, everything in that -- in that

office has been removed. Everything was a total loss in there as well as throughout the building. This is the Father Sweeney Head Start Center. This is our third hardest hit center. There -- there were three that were really, really bad; and this is a hard hit center in western Harrison County. Considered to be a total loss, everything inside is -- is destroyed. These buses behind me were parked behind the center, and were moved to where they are, slammed together, by the force of the water from the storm surge. Hi, how are you? MOTHER: Okay, come on in. LINDA: Now, has your family service worker been in touch with you from Head Start? PARENT: Someone called me to tell me -- you know, asked me how was I -- everything was and stuff. LINDA: Okay. MOTHER: I don't remember who, to be honest with you. LINDA: Did we need to do anything for you? MOTHER: No, ma'am. LINDA: You certain? [Laughter] WOMAN 4: Wasn't [inaudible] receiving speech therapy? Is he still receiving... MOTHER: Yeah. Yeah, they -- they called to find out where he was at. And I finally got them organized and -- and so they're going to the daycare to give him speech therapy. But they know he's switching back because I haven't -- I definitely told everybody he's going back. You know, it's just a pit stop for now; but he's going back to Head Start. Okay. Appreciate it. WOMAN 5: It'll keep him going so when we come back he'll be ready. MOTHER: Yeah. [Laughter] I appreciate all y'all do... WOMAN 6: If you don't mind, could I take a picture? MOTHER: Sure. Come on, give me some love, Miss Harvey. [Laughter] WOMAN 5: I'll get in on that picture. WOMAN 6: Say "Head Start." TOGETHER: Head Start! LINDA: We lived about a quarter of a mile from the shoreline. We left to be safe, and of course the storm was pretty bad where we went to. But when we returned, it was really very eerie when we walked into our apartment. Everything was just as we left it, but it was wet. And the more we looked around, the more we realized that we probably have lost everything that's in here. But we also remembered that we're healthy, we have jobs that we can return to, and we can begin again. Okay, I think that's it. I think that's everything. Feels pretty good. I'll feel a lot better when it's all done. And whatever furniture's in here -- we're putting in here, and then I'll feel much better. Definitely starting over. JAMES COLVIN: What I can say about the Head Start staff is they are my heroes. They did whatever they needed to do. And I see this as being a story to tell. Let's tell -- let's show the world that we don't just preach a good sermon, we live a good sermon. BUS DRIVER: Last call for cruise ship riders; last call for cruise ship bus riders. JANET SPEARS: My family, we're living on the Carnival cruise ship. We've been here for about two-and-a-half to three months now. For them to have lost their homes and have a place to stay now, I feel that it makes them feel good to even know that their teacher is going through the same things that they're going through. So, you know, we've really connected, and we've learned a lot from this experience. It really brought us a lot closer together. VANESSA GIBSON: They're the best. They -- I have had people show up to work under the worst of circumstances. And that -- that's the best I can tell you, is that -- you know, you've got five feet of water in your house and your car went for a swim, but you got to work. You were concerned about your children; you wanted to know where your babies were, you know. How did they fare in this situation? And so, they're -- they're wonderful people, and I -- and I'm very proud to be associated with them. WOMAN 7:I see Head Start as a sign of hope. CHARLOTTE: I'm so honored and humbled by everything that I have seen people do. And the sincerity and the amount of giving that is absolutely from the heart. PEARLIE: I've been with the program since 1965. So I had 40 years of memories and memorabilia and trophies and... Matter of fact, I had the conference booklet from the first conference I attended -- Head Start conference I attended in 1966. That's gone. And -- and so is it -- my house, too. You lost those material things, but they really are not your history. They really -- that's not what brought you to this point. Experiences that Head Start provided for me since 1965 -- and for others since 1965 -- and we're using that, overlaying it with what the situation is now, and we're moving on. CHILDREN: ♪ Out came the sun and dried up all the rain; so the itsy-bitsy spider climbed the spout again. ♪ Yay! [Clapping] [Music]

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