



The future is in our hands

Preparing and helping children to deal with major incidents is the foundation of ensuring resilient communities. **Claire Sanders** speaks to Heather Beal, president and CEO of Blocks, a non-profit organisation that aims to build preparedness into childcare programmes

Beal's route to founding Building Links between Offices of Emergency Management, Childcare and the Community for Kids' Safety (Blocks) started when she joined the US Navy.

Twenty-three years later, after acquiring a variety of academic degrees en route, she attended an enlightening emergency management conference in 2014.

While at the conference, she had a sudden realisation: "My child was not safe from disaster and her childcare providers didn't have any of the tools they needed to keep her safe. I decided to do something about it and, by January 2015, Blocks was born." Based in Washington State USA, it prepares individuals and childcare programmes to face and recover from major incidents.

Motivated by the fact that in the US, 60 per cent of children aged five and under spend an average of around 35 hours per week in childcare, Beal set up Blocks for two main reasons: "First, it is most likely that providers will have our children with them when something happens during a disaster. Second, childcare plays a key role in the recovery of children. Research has proven that a return to routine and a stable environment is critical to help them recover from disaster."

Beal suggests that although childcare providers are often first responders in an incident, they are not trained adequately. She says: "Frustratingly, childcare is regulated by different state agencies depending on the state, so there is no national childcare preparedness standard.

Although there is training on health and safety issues and most states regulate the number of fire drills, stand downs, earthquake training or the requirement for an emergency operations plan, there is almost no oversight by trained emergency managers. Childcare providers are left on their own to interpret what to do, how, and why."

Because almost 60 per cent of childcare is for profit, it is not considered as critical infrastructure and is thus typically ineligible for state or federal recovery funding. Beal says: "One of the key points I often make is that a community cannot recover if its parents cannot go back to work, and how can parents go back to work if there is no safe place to take their children post-disaster?"

Necessary skills

In terms of having the necessary skills for the job, Beal says: "I am an IAEM Certified Emergency Manager with a Master's Degree and a PhD in Emergency Management. That said, I don't look at those as requirements for the job, but advantages." In founding Blocks, she wanted the organisation to have a core foundation of emergency management trained and experienced personnel.

Continuing this work, Beal concludes: "We are talking to emergency management and business continuity professionals about the importance of planning for children before and during a disaster. We are continuing to expand our reach and let people know that we are out there, and we can help."

■ www.blocksusa.org/certification

Earthquake training at Martha and Mary's Children's Care Centre in Poulsbo, WA

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