

Milligan preparing child care for disaster

MILLIGAN COLLEGE — The tornadoes that struck East Tennessee, Joplin, Mo., and other parts of the country this spring were devastating reminders of the importance of disaster preparedness in every facet of the community — from emergency responders to child care programs.

A national set of standards written by Dr. Beverly Schmalzried, a nationally known child care advocate and professor of the practice of education at Milligan College, could help child care centers and family child care homes across the country better prepare themselves and their communities for emergencies such as these.

The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) and Save the Children's U.S. Programs recently released the standards, titled "Protecting Children in Child Care During Emergencies." These standards make specific recommendations and establish guidelines for incorporating disaster preparedness in state child care regulations.

"This is so important because children are our most vulnerable citizens, and we want to do everything we can to make sure the centers and homes that are caring for them are not vulnerable due to lack of preparation," Schmalzried said. "A lot of child care programs don't have an emergency plan in place. They might know what they would do, but they don't have these important things in writing, such as where they're going to evacuate the children to, how they would get them there and how they're going to reunite the children with their parents."

The recommended national standards address issues uncovered in a 2010 Save the Children study, which found that 36 states are missing key child care regulations that would better protect children in child care before, during and after disasters.

"Our nation's children spend, on average, 36 hours per week in some form of child care and most of the child care workforce has not received basic disaster preparedness training," said Linda K. Smith, executive director of NACCRRA.

"A comprehensive and viable emergency plan must be a core component of state child care regulations to ensure that all children are protected in times of crisis."

As a result, NACCRRA and Save the Children developed detailed child care emergency preparedness standards to implement Save the Children's policy recommendations and serve as a model for states.

"Another critical thing child care programs must address is a plan to reopen after a disaster," Schmalzried said. "There are first responders and others who have to go to work after a disaster, and they're going to need child care