

Written Testimony of Lindsay Huckabee
Prepared for the Committee on Science and Technology
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I would like to start by thanking the Members of this Congressional Committee for taking the time to address this issue and for allowing me the honor of coming before you to speak. My name is Lindsay Huckabee and I currently am currently living in Diamondhead, Mississippi in a hotel with my husband and our five children.

On August 29, 2005, our apartment and all of its contents were destroyed by hurricane Katrina. We contacted the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and were granted immediate assistance. In early October, we received a travel trailer to use as a temporary shelter. We were unable to stay in the travel trailer because of the many maintenance problems it had. After six weeks of no response from the maintenance department, we contacted FEMA about a replacement unit. We were told that we qualified for a singlewide mobile home because of our family size so we cleared a site and provided septic, water and power to the site at our expense. We met all of the requirements and the trailer was delivered December 14, 2005. We could smell something in the trailer as soon as we entered and it made our noses, eyes and throats burn, but we thought it was normal for a new trailer to smell this way. We had no idea that we were moving into a home that would be making our family sick. We aired out the trailer and, eventually we became accustomed to the smell and did not notice it unless we were gone for a day or more.

In the twenty-nine months since we received our first FEMA trailer, our family has suffered many health issues. Four of my five children have been treated for asthma and all four of them have current prescriptions for breathing treatments. All five children, my husband and I have allergy and sinus symptoms with no positive allergen that shows up on a test. We all keep the "allergic black eyes;" that is what doctors call the purple circles under our eyes that give us a constant tired and sick look.

My husband has been on a daily sinus and allergy medication, had a tumor removed from the soft pallet of his mouth, and been on antibiotics about every other month. Our Ear, Nose and Throat doctor (ENT) said that while he could not be sure that the formaldehyde caused the tumor, it was in a location he had never personally seen before and he would not rule it out as it is known to cause cancer of the nasal passages and lungs.

My daughter Vicki is 13 years old and has had a sore throat off and on since moving into the first FEMA trailer. Vicki keeps mild congestion in her sinuses and has been on antibiotics several times, but has never been hospitalized.

My daughter Caitlin will be nine this month, she has had sinus infections, pneumonia, asthmatic bronchitis, sore throat, nose bleeds, headaches and asthmatic symptoms. Caitlin is currently on a daily allergy medication and inhaled asthma medication as needed. Prior to living in the trailers Caitlin had never been treated for any breathing problems. Caitlin has had many x-rays and been on antibiotics again and again, but she has only been hospitalized once.

Lelah is six years old and since moving in to our first FEMA trailer she has developed moderate asthma and has also had sinus infections severe enough to need an operation to widen her sinus passages. Lelah's doctor said that with the sinus tissue

staying inflamed from the constant irritation, there was nowhere for the sinus fluid to drain. Lelah has had pneumonia, ear infections, throat infections, asthmatic bronchitis, nose bleeds, headaches, two MRIs and has been put under for surgery four times. Lelah is currently on three daily medications with two more as needed. In the past Lelah has been on as many as eight daily medications at one time and she has been hospitalized three times.

Steven is four years old and has been pretty fortunate health wise. Steven is on a daily allergy medication and he has had asthmatic bronchitis, pneumonia, sinus infections and nose bleeds. Steven has also been treated with breathing treatments for asthma. Prior to living in the FEMA trailers Steven had never had breathing problems of any kind. Steven has only been hospitalized once.

Michael is two years old and he was born prematurely after we moved into our FEMA trailer. Michael has had sinus infections off and on since he was six days old; he has also had asthmatic bronchitis, pneumonia, laryngitis, only a few nosebleeds and undergone cardiac testing because he occasionally turns blue for an unknown reason. Michael is currently on two daily allergy medications, a nasal steroid, and antibiotics for the sixth straight week. Michael has been hospitalized three times.

I have had migraine headaches, sinus infections, throat infections, bronchitis, and sleep deprived. My doctor has given me sleeping medication; muscle relaxers and we have spoken about anti depressants to handle the stress of taking care of sick children while I myself am sick too. I decided against the anti depressants because while I am stressed, I don't feel like I am depressed and I don't need anything that would alter my thinking.

Were all these caused by formaldehyde? I believe that they were either caused by it or made worse by it. Everywhere I look for an answer I come up empty. No one seems to know enough about it to say for sure. We know that it CAN cause all these and many more health effects. I don't think that it is just by chance all my children were healthy in the years before the hurricane and once getting into trailers changed. We have no way of knowing what Michael's health would have been like were he not born into a FEMA trailer.

I was told by our E.N.T. that we needed to get out of the trailer as soon as we could. He had many repeat patients with the same symptoms all living in FEMA trailers. He said that there were chemicals that could be making my children sick. Both Lelah and Michael have been to an Allergy and Asthma specialist. He has done allergy test and found nothing. He said that there must be exposure to some sort of irritant rather than an actual allergy to something. Then he asked if we were in a FEMA trailer. He too had seen an increase of patients with inactive or mild asthma having more severe problems upon moving into these trailers. .

After months and months of office visits and phone calls, I was frustrated and upset. Before moving into the FEMA trailer, I can't remember going to the doctor other than for well-child checks and a few times with Lelah when she was very young. To date I am still at the doctor's office or calling just about every week. Our pediatrician, Dr. Needle, told me that there seemed to be a trend among patients in FEMA trailers and increased office visits with allergy-like symptoms. He had been doing some research and thought that formaldehyde may be our problem. It was through him that a Sierra Club member contacted me about a formaldehyde test to see if we were living in levels that

could be dangerous. I really did not want this to be the answer, since we had nowhere else to go.

We had a formaldehyde test done on our trailer in April of 2007. Our first trailer was a Fleetwood home built in November of 2005. The test came back as 0.18 ppm, which is well above the 0.10 ppm believed to be harmful to humans according to one agency. There is no way to know how high it was in the 16 months we lived in the trailer prior to having it tested. Since FEMA suggested that “opening windows would out-gas the fumes and lower the level”, I have to believe that the level was much higher when we moved in. When we told FEMA about the test, we met much opposition. FEMA representatives were rude when I called them. I was forced to call more than 5 different representatives, and my request for a new mobile home was lost twice before anything was done to help solve my problem. Finally, FEMA agreed to replace our mobile home. We were told that the new trailer would be “formaldehyde free”. It was supposed to be a used FEMA trailer built in 2005 by Destiny. We had a formaldehyde test done on the new FEMA trailer before we started to move anything into it. An inspector from FEMA saw the tester hanging and asked what it was. When I told him it was used to test for formaldehyde, he said that people were claiming to have high formaldehyde levels so they could get bigger and better trailers. When I asked if FEMA had done test to find this out, he said NO. The test on the new trailer came back at 0.108 ppm, which is still above the level believed to be harmful, but lower than the last trailer. When we called FEMA to tell them what the results were, the lady said, “it is lower than the other trailer, so we are good, right?”

After returning from Washington DC in July of 2007, we received information from FEMA on formaldehyde. The information sheet gave a number for FEMA to call for more details on what levels were acceptable and what the long-term health effects would be. The number proved to be useless. After talking to the woman at FEMA about our symptoms and our concerns we were told that it did not sound like we had a problem with formaldehyde. We had already had a test done on our trailer so we knew what our problem was. We were told that we did not qualify for the formaldehyde-testing program. We then asked what level was considered safe for us to live in and her response was “I don’t know you have to call the CDC for that information.” We called the CDC number we were given and it proved to be as useless as the FEMA number. First we were told to call FEMA. After insisting that we had already called them and been told to call the CDC number, we were transferred to six different desks of people in different departments and levels of management where the final answer we received was that we needed to talk to FEMA about our concerns. The CDC representatives said that they did not have information on levels of formaldehyde and what was safe and what was not. We were told that the employees could not give us their names or even an employee number therefore there was no way for us to follow up on the conversations or have anyone to hold accountable for the lack of information.

I was able to meet with several CDC officers at a meeting held in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi on March 6th 2008. I found them very willing to answer our questions about the formaldehyde and possible effects on people. I was surprised to learn how little is known about formaldehyde and long-term effects. While searching for the magic “safe” level of formaldehyde, we found several different numbers through the internet. The level of .1ppm, the most commonly accepted safe limit, was not intended to gauge how safe

exposure was for children, people with breathing problems, or even healthy adults for longer than the average workday. According to the CDC representative I spoke with at the community meeting that was held to answer questions about formaldehyde, there is “No safe level for exposure in a residence.” I was told at the meeting that CDC was not aware of the issue until after the July 17th hearing last year. I personally find this hard to believe. It is my understanding that the ATSDR did the original testing for FEMA and OSHA when they wanted to know what the levels were for employees and how to bring them down. They reported the levels to FEMA and agreed to not share the information. They even sent a revised letter making sure the FEMA knew that there was no known SAFE level for people to live in since formaldehyde is a known carcinogen. ATSDR is a part of CDC. According to everything I can find on the CDC and ATSDR, both claim to exist to protect us from toxic substances – like formaldehyde. What I can’t understand is, how an agency set in place to protect the people, failed to let the People know about this problem. I did not think it was there to help the government find out how much it messed up and then help them keep quiet about it. I know that at least one pediatrician contacted the CDC to find out about starting a study and researching what was going on down here with the kids in the FEMA travel trailers and mobile homes.

There is now evidence that FEMA knew about the formaldehyde as early as December of 2005, which is the same time that I got my first mobile home. They covered up the problem, hid behind lawyers and made sure they could not be held responsible. FEMA made people feel like they were being picky, and ungrateful for mentioning the illnesses and requesting assistance. While FEMA was covering their behinds, my children were staying sick. I blamed myself for not doing enough to keep them well, but when FEMA took on the role of landlord for the thousands of people, they took on the responsibility to provide a safe and healthy living environment for these people.

While no one should have been exposed to a toxin for over two years, I think that the CDC should take advantage of this disaster and learn everything they can about formaldehyde. It is bad enough that we questioned every symptom and the length of every illness wondering if we would have gotten sick in the first place, or why all the other kids that caught this cold at the same time have been done with it for weeks, but the fact that NO ONE can tell us how long the effects of formaldehyde will stay with us, is horrifying. This is not a new chemical. There should be more information on it. When the CDC and ATSDR first knew that people were living in these levels and there was even a possibility that they were getting sick, they should have stepped in and found out what was going on. Two years later, after so many people have moved on, some even died in these trailers, it may be too late to know the full extent of what effect formaldehyde has on people. There were people of every age, race, and economic status in these trailers. I feel like after it was first known that the formaldehyde was a problem, we were lab rats subjected to the toxin, but no one wanted to record the results.