

Advocacy, Decision Making, and Support Strategies in Addressing Infant Feeding for the Fort McMurray Wildfire Evacuees

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Background: In May 2016, nearly 90,000 people were evacuated from Fort McMurray, Canada, during a widespread wildfire. The majority of the residents drove south to Edmonton and Calgary, although some also drove north and were later evacuated by air. This presentation discussed preliminary qualitative findings from a focus group conducted with health workers who supported mothers during the evacuation. This focus group is part of a larger project of data collection regarding the overall challenges associated with infant feeding during the Fort McMurray wildfire evacuation. The focus group took place in November 2016 in Red Deer, Canada, during a day-long training session on *Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies* (IYCF-E). The seven people who participated in the focus group worked as lactation consultants, doulas, midwives, and other health workers.

Purpose: Data were coded in NVivo using a content analysis approach. The main purpose of identifying themes was twofold: (a) to bridge these themes to other issues that may emerge from quantitative data in the larger project and (b) to understand the unique perspective of the “helpers” in the evacuation. Findings from the focus group revealed several major themes about the main strategies that health workers and volunteers used to form the IYCF-E–Alberta group. This group reached mothers in person, through social media, and by telephone. The group mobilized in three main ways: (a) creation of social media outreach, (b) creation of an 800 number for support, and (c) in-person assessments of mothers with milk-fed infants in evacuation areas. Although they organized rapidly, several of the helpers also expressed concern that the resources for “manning” these phone lines were limited. Nonetheless, evacuees called the hotline not only for infant-feeding support but also to seek support on general questions regarding sheltering, access to utilities, and other basic needs. This suggests that the IYCF-E advocates, in some ways, filled a gap that would typically be the function of emergency management or government support systems.

Conclusion: The data from the focus group also revealed themes regarding strategies for obtaining entry into relief centers (of particular importance for disaster fieldwork implications), unique needs of immigrant and non-English speaking evacuees, logistic challenges associated with food and formula distribution (concentrated formula was in several cases not diluted), and various concerns related to emotional well-being of young children (stress and boredom in sheltering spaces). This study is important because, to date, no empirical research exists on the effect of wildfire evacuation on infant feeding.