

MELISSA

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especially when you have
so many medical problems.”**

Melissa, 45 years old, single mother with two sons living in a trailer in New Orleans, interviewed January 30, 2006

“I had two cars, I had two jobs, and we were living comfortably.” Melissa is a 45 year-old white single mother with two sons, 12 year-old Michael and 8 year-old Patrick. Melissa lived in a double-wide trailer in St. Bernard Parish, which is part of the Greater New Orleans area, with her two sons prior to the hurricane. By working hard at two jobs, Melissa was generally able to make ends meet for her family. Her children were happy—“they had their friends, they had their schools, and they got to play in the evenings.”

Aside from “female problems,” Melissa was in pretty good health before the hurricane. Her two sons, however, were receiving treatment for serious chronic conditions. Both sons were born with monotonic dystrophy, a type of muscular dystrophy that can include seizures. As Melissa described, the younger son “has asthma, ADHD, monotonic dystrophy, seizures. He is deaf in the right ear.” The oldest son was also diagnosed at about the age of seven as a bipolar schizophrenic. The boys were taking a number of prescriptions to manage their conditions—seven for Michael and two for Patrick—and had frequent medical appointments. Melissa reports, “My son has always been seen by a psychiatrist, since he has been seven, because he is a schizophrenic bipolar.”

Though Melissa got health coverage through her job with the school board, from birth, both her sons have

qualified for Medicaid coverage based upon their health conditions. Even with all of the health care needs of her children, including monthly psychiatrist appointments for Michael, Melissa never had difficulty paying for their care. “The Medicaid paid for it,” she responded when asked about purchasing the boys’ numerous prescription drugs.

“I expected to be back in four days.” Melissa and her family left their home having packed as much as they could fit into the family van. “I packed four sets of clothes for them, took all their medicines, took my medicines, pulled every picture off the wall, packed it up in a suitcase, loaded up the van and got the dog and the hamster.” Fortunately, Melissa also packed important documents like birth certificates and social security cards. The family traveled to Tupelo, MS, on Sunday of the storm and was able to find a hotel room. Though Melissa expected to be gone only four days, the family stayed at that hotel for over a month. The family received a small FEMA trailer, which is now located on their old property in St. Bernard Parish. Melissa has found a part-time job, but her health insurance through her old job at the school board was scheduled to expire in the summer.

“My twelve year-old, it has affected him a great deal.” In the time since the hurricane, Melissa and her boys’ mental status has declined. Melissa reports, “I

find myself very depressed, more on edge now ... It is like my whole life has just come to a dead end." Melissa does not sleep well at night. However, the storm has been hardest on her older son, who suffers from bipolar schizophrenia. Melissa noted, "My twelve year-old has tried to kill himself due to the storm, being moved around, picked on."

The disconnection from care and from some of his psychiatric medications after the storm was a contributing factor to her older son's decline. Though Melissa took medications with them when they evacuated, Michael went without medicine for his schizophrenia for two weeks because, "at the time, there was no one out there to get it. They didn't have any refills, no doctors." Melissa noted, "... with a schizophrenic when they are out of medicine—even when they are on medicine, they still have episodes. They flicker like a light switch." Melissa was in the process of trying to reconnect Michael with his psychiatrist when the suicidal episode occurred. Michael met with his psychiatrist shortly after the episode and returned to his full regimen of medications.

"It is so hard to find anybody ... especially when you have so many medical problems." Melissa and her family had a difficult time reconnecting with all their providers, including Michael's psychiatrist, after the hurricane. Melissa worked to find providers "through the phone book or word of mouth" to get her sons into treatment again. She tried calling Medicaid to get a list of providers but "could never get through.

Sometimes I would be on the phone four or five times a day, trying to call them." Melissa is still searching for a gynecologist for herself but has finally found providers for her children's medical needs.

"You don't want to go anymore because of the traveling time." Melissa now faces new challenges getting to medical appointments because the providers are scattered across the region. "Before we had everything in a close knit community, it was like the dermatologist, pediatrician, dentist was all right there ... Now we have to travel ... which takes sometimes two hours ... you don't want to go anymore because of the traveling time."

Melissa and her sons have maintained their health coverage throughout the time since the hurricane, which has been helpful in accessing medical care. Melissa was able to replace a breathing machine lost in the storm that manages her younger son's asthma. When asked about out-of-pocket medical expenses she has paid since the storm, Melissa replied "just for my medicine, my copay, that is all, but not for my kids, no."

"Try not to continue the disruption we already had." In the wake of so many changes for her family, Melissa is currently focused on maintaining as much consistency in her family's life as possible. She has been making sure the boys get to bed on time, eat well, and keep up with school. Melissa is currently working part-time and plans to apply for another job.