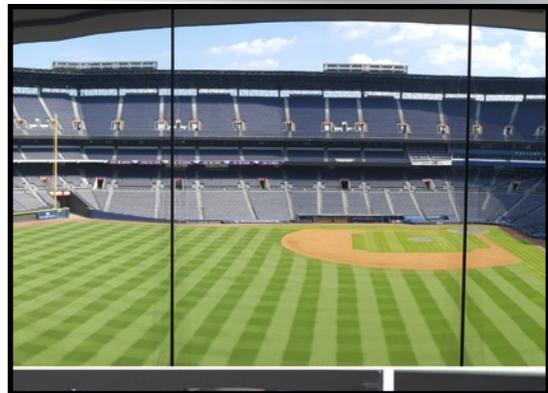




**Professional Counseling Programs
Ebook Series**

Disaster Relief Edition

**Reflection articles from Penfield
College counseling students enrolled in
the Disaster Counseling course at
Mercer University**



Mercer University Doctoral students and Disaster Counseling course faculty member attended the Red Cross Volunteer Recognition at the 755 Club at Turner Field.

Above: Shatel Francis, Felicia Tillman, Red Cross Exceptional Volunteer Honoree Lewis Wynder, Dr. Caroline Brackette, and Melissa Waller

Below: Felicia Tillman, Melissa Waller, Metro Atlanta American Red Cross CEO Terri Badour Duckett, Shatel Francis, and Dr. Caroline Brackette

Special Theme Edition

Student reflections on their disaster relief training experiences from the summer 2016 Disaster Counseling course at Mercer University

Contributors

Shatel Francis

Walter Hughes

Rajeive Manradgh (RJ)

Jasmine Posey

Natalie Segovia

Felicia Tillman

Melissa Waller

Editor

Dr. Caroline M. Brackette, LPC, ACS



Disasters can occur at anytime and disrupt the lives of many people. As a disaster mental health relief volunteer with the American Red Cross I have witnessed the impact of disasters, and the mitigating affect of relief operations. In order to continue to effectively provide assistance to those communities in need, it is important to recruit and train volunteers for all relief service areas.

I developed a disaster counseling course to raise awareness of masters and doctoral level counseling students about disaster relief operations. The students also engaged in completing the training requirements to become disaster relief volunteers in various relief operation service areas. While theses students are not able to volunteer in the disaster mental health role until they are independently licensed, they are able to deploy as disaster relief volunteers and provide various additional services to individuals impacted by disasters.

This publication is a collection of articles written by students enrolled in the course. Their reflections provide insight into the training requirements and service area opportunities for relief volunteers. Additionally, they address implications for future and current counselors based on their disaster relief preparation experience. My hope is that their reflections will inspire others to complete the training to be prepared to serve as volunteers during disasters and support the care and recovery of those in need.

Picking Up the Pieces: The Role of the Counselor in Disaster Relief

Felicia Tillman

Disaster Relief

Rosen, Matthieu and Norris (2009) define disaster relief as providing a short-term mental health intervention, while linking those affected to resources that will meet their immediate needs. In addition, disaster relief is intended to restore some sense of normalcy to the lives of the survivors. While this type of relief is much needed after a major disaster or natural catastrophe, it can be viewed as yet a second disaster by the survivor (Myers, 1994). The stress of navigating the systems in place for recovery can be overwhelming for those who have already experienced the initial trauma. Counselors, who are often first responders in these situations need to be aware of this phenomenon in the aftermath of the catastrophe.

Disaster mental health is a component of disaster relief and is composed of several components. The role of the counselor in disaster mental health is different from typical counseling in that practicality can often become the initial priority above psychology (Myers, 1994). Counselors may be responsible for initial needs assessments of shelter and sustenance while conducting the assessment for an additional mental health referral (Rosen et al., 2009). While counselors may be accustomed to the traditional client seeking out services, disaster survivors

typically do not do so. Disaster mental health counselors need to be prepared to canvas the affected areas for persons in need of services. Possessing knowledge of resources for referrals is an important part of the role a disaster mental health counselor plays prior to assessing for mental health needs. Once a mental health assessment is complete, counselors may then provide psychological first aid in the form of psychoeducation or brief counseling to assist in immediate coping (Rosen, et al., 2009). In addition, counselors assume the role of observer for all of the disaster relief volunteers on site. Bowman and Roysicar (2011) contend that disaster relief workers are often the first witnesses to the emotional or physical fatigue of their colleagues during a disaster situation. Extended exposure to catastrophes and the effects on survivors can serve as a stress trigger for disaster relief workers (Bowman & Roysicar, 2011).

Areas of Training for the Counselor

Due to the unique nature of disaster mental health needs, counselors will require training to work with the survivor population. Myers (1994) posited that community outreach approaches that remove the stigma of mental health assistance are most effective during a disaster. Terminology choice is a simple way to increase survivor acceptance and use of services. For instance, working with a crisis assistant removes the stigma of speaking with a therapist (Myers, 1994). Similarly, training on disaster phases will help disaster mental

health workers to meet the survivors at their place of need (Myers, 1994). Several phases of disaster responses have been identified as follows. The honeymoon phase is described as the initial phase where the affect of the survivor is flat and numbness to the trauma is present. The next phase that counselors should understand is the inventory phase when the disaster survivors are inquiring about the details of what actually took place. Finally, the disillusionment phase of the disaster may indicate to the counselor the readiness of the survivor to emote and express their feelings about what has occurred (Myers, 1994).

In summary, unique disaster mental health training which includes community outreach is necessary for counselors to be successful with populations in crisis. Counselors are better able to serve disaster survivors when they are equipped with the skills that help remove the stigma of mental health assistance. The ultimate goal in disaster mental health assistance is to help the survivors regain a semblance of normalcy after a crisis. Specific training in care for masses of survivors, as well as disaster action team training can undergird current skills of disaster response workers.

Training Experience Reflection

I experienced two distinct types of training that are essential in disaster relief efforts: mass care and disaster action team. Mass care, or the care of large populations post-disaster requires an understanding of

several elements that one may not readily think of. First, the set-up of the facility is critical in the establishment of comfort for those affected. I was trained on specific mapping of bed layouts as well as scheduling of essential functions such as meal times and lights out. In mass care, trainees must also learn about registration, privacy of the guests, and keeping daily statistics of the functioning of the shelter facility. Finally, disaster relief workers are trained on appropriate messaging and communications with media outlets and specific closure plans. While all of the facets of the training were necessary, I believe that the best learning experience in this situation would be experiential.

The second area of training I experienced was disaster action team (DAT). DAT training was critical, as these teams are the first responders for the Red Cross on the scene of a disaster. These disasters are characterized by, but are not limited to, residential fires, tornadoes, chemical spills, plane crashes, mudslides and other natural or human catastrophes. Most recently, DAT workers were deployed to assist law enforcement workers during recent protests by providing meals, water, and snacks. In Georgia, DAT responders serve an average of 40 clients each day. Training was necessary to navigate the Volunteer Connection database as well as to determine the allowed services and resources for those in need. Another part of the DAT training was to become familiar with the different Red Cross vehicles that may be present on the scene. The class I was

enrolled in was taught by a very enthusiastic Red Cross DAT volunteer who made the intense training easy to follow and apply in a real life situation. I feel well prepared to go out to a call and be effective.

Implications for Counselors in Disaster Relief

Unfortunately, disasters of various types seem to happen all too often in the United States and worldwide. As a result, more trained disaster relief workers are needed. Specifically, trained disaster mental health workers will be needed to bridge the gap between crisis and post-disaster normalcy. I noticed a shortage of minority disaster mental health volunteers in the Georgia area. Since many survivors are more able to identify with relief workers that look like themselves, the vision for the future could be to increase the presence of minority disaster mental health providers. This could possibly assist in increasing the multicultural competency of existing workers while infusing diversity into the disaster mental health arena for the good of the affected communities.

References

- Bowman, S., Roysicar, G. (2011). Training practice in trauma, catastrophes and disaster. *The Counseling Psychologist*. (38) 1160-1181.
- Myers, D. (1994). Psychological recovery from disaster: Key concepts for delivery of mental health services. *NCP Quarterly* 4(2).1-7.
- Rosen, C., Matthieu, M., Norris, F. (2009). Factors predicting crisis counselor referrals to other crisis counseling, disaster relief, and psychological services: A cross-site analysis of post-Katrina. *Administrative Policy on Mental Health*. (36)186. doi: 10.1007/s10488-009-0216-0.

The Red Cross: Changing the Lives of Survivors Through Disaster Counseling

Jasmine Posey

A disaster is “something (such as a flood, tornado, fire, plane crash, etc.) that happens suddenly and causes much suffering or loss to many people” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). While there are many organizations dedicated to coming to the aid of individuals involved in disasters, the American Red Cross is one of the most well known. The American Red Cross (Red Cross) (2016) responds to an emergency every eight minutes. The organization responds to over 65,000 disasters each year, 90% of which are home fires. The Red Cross recognizes the need to provide services for the thousands of individuals who are faced with disasters, and provides an abundance of services to assist with the challenges that occur when disaster strikes. The frequency, unpredictability and the destruction that disasters cause to an individual’s mental, social, and physical environment creates the necessity for adequate disaster relief.

Disaster relief involves preparing for disasters (promoting awareness of risks and minimizing the impact of the event to help communities regain stability), responding to disasters as they occur (meeting individuals’, families’, and communities’ disaster needs), and recovering after the disaster is over (assisting survivors to move through the recovery process) (American Red Cross,

2016). There are a multitude of disaster relief services that are provided by agencies, particularly the Red Cross, in which individuals are provided an opportunity to pick up the pieces needed to reconstruct their lives. The Red Cross offers overnight shelter stays, emergency supply kits, meals, as well as health and mental health services. Survivors of disasters often need continued relief services long after the disaster has ended, and ensuring that these services are available can help to reduce stress, grief, and trauma that was experienced from the event that occurred.

Counselors play a key role in disaster relief by serving in a variety of roles through the Red Cross by providing individual client services. Licensed clinicians can interact with survivors of disasters directly by serving in Disaster Mental Health. These clinicians are able to provide crisis intervention, mental health screenings and assessments, as well as emotional care and support. While counselors in this position do not offer traditional counseling with multiple follow up sessions, they are still able to assist individuals by providing resources and identifying those individuals who could benefit from additional mental health services. Counselors who have not yet obtained licensure can still interact directly with clients by assisting with client casework. Red Cross client caseworkers work with clients long after a disaster has ended by continuing to evaluate client needs, provide services, and maintain client records.

Another way that counselors can be actively involved in contributing to disaster relief is by joining the Red Cross's Disaster Action Team (DAT). The DAT members are trained volunteers who respond to single and multi-family disasters. These members are the first on the scene when a disaster occurs. DAT members respond to both local (residential fires, windstorms, tornados, and flooding) and national disasters. These volunteers provide assistance to individuals in the community by providing immediate emotional support and assessing the severity of the individuals' situation. After members have assessed each individual's situation, they are able to provide survivors with a preloaded debit card so that individuals can begin taking the necessary steps to reassembling their lives. Joining the Disaster Action Team gives counselors the opportunity to serve and give back to members of their communities.

When providing services to disaster survivors it is important that counselors receive the appropriate certifications and trainings. One training that I personally gained a lot of knowledge from was the Psychological First Aid training provided through the American Red Cross. According to the Red Cross (2012), psychological first aid is "the practice of recognizing and responding to people who need help because they are feeling stress, resulting from the disaster situations within which they find themselves" (p.13). This training provides information on how to recognize disaster related stress and how it can present itself in

both children and adults. In addition to this, the training also provides information for making appropriate referrals for survivors who could benefit from additional mental health services. The PsySTART card provided during the training serves as a guide to help identify "red flags". Recognizing these "red flags" can help counselors provide assistance to individuals who may be at risk to themselves (suicidal ideations, substance abuse) or others (homicidal ideations, child or elder abuse, aggressive behaviors or violence).

Another training that I learned a lot from was the DAT training, which demonstrated the importance of assessment and documenting circumstances surrounding a disaster. Just as documentation is a critical part of a traditional counseling session it is also necessary for first responders. Ensuring that documentation is accurate and submitted in a timely manner enables clients to get the appropriate services, but also protects counselors and the organization. The training also addressed safety and boundary precautions. When assisting in disasters, counselors should always go into areas in pairs and should never transport clients regardless of the situation. While it is easy to be consumed with compassion and wanting what is best for the client, counselors should remember that even when disasters occur there are not only ethical boundaries, but organizational boundaries which are set in place for both the client and the counselors well-being.

Unfortunately, as often as disasters occur, disaster counseling is not a required course necessary to complete many counseling programs, nor is it a required in order to obtain licensure as a professional counselor. This leaves many future clinicians unaware of the impact that disasters have on individuals, as well as limits how many students are competent in caring for clients who have been impacted by disasters. Disasters place survivors who are unable to cope at risk, and it is necessary that clinicians be educated on how to deal and respond appropriately. It is important to raise awareness in the counseling field for the need for disaster counselors. In doing so, conversations can be sparked on the best courses of treatment for these individuals as well as provide clinicians with the necessary tools and resources to assist clients. Disasters will continue to occur, be unpredictable, and impact the lives of thousands of individuals, and because of this it is the responsibility of counselors to be well informed on how to work with these individuals to ensure that future clinicians are provided with the opportunity to develop skills in working with these clients as well.

References

- American Red Cross. (2016). Disaster Relief. Retrieved July 10, 2016, from <http://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief>
- American Red Cross. (2012). Psychological First Aid: Helping Others in Times of Stress. Participants Workbook.
- Myers, D., (1994). Psychological Recovery From Disaster: Key Concepts For Delivery Of Mental Health Services. *NCP Clinical Quarterly*, 4(2).
- Merriam-Webster. (2015). Disaster. Retrieved July 10, 2016, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disaster>

Reflection: Counseling Children after Natural Disasters

Melissa Waller

Introduction to Disaster Relief

Natural disasters are a persistent threat to children and cause the aforesaid to be one of the most vulnerable populations during natural disasters (Baggerly & Herbert, 2008). This is due to their lack of coping skills and neuro-physiological systems not being fully developed to comprehend catastrophic events (Baggerly & Herbert, 2008). In 2015, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA, 2016) declared 79 federal disasters such as hurricanes, tornados, floods, and fires requiring disaster relief assistance from the American Red Cross (American Red Cross, 2016).

Disaster relief assistance is an emergency management response to a catastrophic (hurricane, tornado, flood, earthquake, wildfire, and/or house fire) event, where philanthropic assistance is provided to individuals and communities who have undergone some form of loss associated with a natural disaster (American Red Cross, 2016). Consequently, in 2006 when scientists predicted high numbers of storms within the next ten years would occur in North America, they were correct (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2006). These natural disasters have doubled since 2005, triggering anxiety and fear in the lives of numerous children and families across the

country requiring assistance from the American Red Cross disaster relief operations and their mental health support volunteers (Baggerly & Herbert, 2008).

Disaster Relief Operation Requirements: Disaster Mental Health Volunteers

The American Red Cross recognizes that a major disaster or emergency situation may cause distress to many families, especially children (American Red Cross, 2016). The families and individuals repositioned by the crisis not only need shelter and food, but also emotional support (American Red Cross, 2016). Many families and vulnerable populations, such as, children may be susceptible to stress when attempting to rationalize their “new normal” as a result of a natural disaster or emergency situation (American Red Cross, 2016).

From its inception in the early 1990s to present, the involvement of the American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health (DMH) team of volunteers has become progressively essential in order to respond and meet needs during disastrous events (American Red Cross, 2016). To guide many children through the days ahead and assist families with restoring hope after a crisis has occurred, the DMH teams provide Red Cross Disaster Relief Operational Services to support volunteers, individuals, and families during disaster relief operations. During the September 11 events, Hurricane Katrina, and Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings the Red Cross Disaster Relief Operation volunteers and

mental health clinicians provided services and Trauma Teddy Bears to comfort children affected by the devastating events (American Red Cross, 2016).

To provide consistency and fidelity, The American Red Cross emphasizes that disaster mental health counselors must have an unrestricted state license issued by a state licensure board and complete required disaster response trainings in order to volunteer at the local or national level (American Red Cross, 2016). If by chance, the individual does not have an independent practice credential, the American Red Cross has several volunteer positions associated with mental health response, such as, logistics, case management, disaster housing/sheltering, mass care/feeding, health care services, (American Red Cross, 2016).

Fundamentals of Disaster Mental Health

Webinars are provided by the American Red Cross to prepare disaster response volunteers, civil service administrators, and communities in order to meet the needs of children. Some of the required courses in order to work with children are, “Disaster Mental Health: Introduction” and “Child Friendly Spaces” (American Red Cross, 2016). Research, and the American Red Cross coursework, reveal most children exhibit temporary indicators of fear during and post disasters (Baggerly & Exum, 2008).

Additionally, symptoms can be alleviated when parents, mental health volunteers, and community responders provide emotional assistance and aid with age appropriate plans for coping (Baggerly & Exum, 2008).

Furthermore, during natural disasters it is encouraged by the American Red Cross to recognize that children may experience quantifiable symptoms, which require age appropriate counseling interventions that integrate play (American Red Cross, 2016; Baggerly & Exum, 2008).

Disaster Mental Health Counselor Interventions

Numerous experts recommend disaster mental health counselors should be prepared to provide appropriate interventions to children who display symptoms of distress after natural disasters. For example, they should be competent in identifying children’s typical and clinical symptoms after the catastrophic event, training parents and community volunteers in basic interventions, and implementing therapeutic interventions that integrate play. In addition, a multimodal, tri-phase approach of cognitive behavior therapy, play therapy, and family play therapy has been endorsed for further post-disaster treatment and supported by evidenced based research (Baggerly & Exum, 2008).

In order to assist children who experience symptoms after a natural disaster, the American Red Cross mental health

volunteer can complete a referral for individual and family counseling, provide crisis interventions, and collaborate with other sectors to provide community resources to support the child's well-being (Baggerly and Exum, 2008; American Red Cross, 2016). In fact, Baggerly and Exum (2008) and the American Red Cross suggest, if children are experiencing prolonged trauma symptoms that disturb their daily performance for an extensive time period after the natural disaster they should be referred for more intensive treatment.

Conclusion

Evidence based research supports a three phase trauma recovery approach of establishing safety, recapping the trauma story, and reconnecting with immediate family members (Baggerly & Exum, 2008). For future implications, the author advises when working with children after natural disasters, via a multimodal three-phase approach clinicians should utilize the following approaches: cognitive behavior therapy to manage symptoms and build rapport, narrative and play therapy to assist the child with retelling their distress story, and family play therapy to reestablish their family dynamic to assist with the family transitioning into a new normal (Baggerly & Exum, 2008).

References

- American Red Cross (2016). *Disaster Training*. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/take-a-class/disaster-training>
- Baggerly, J., & Exum, H. (2008). Counseling children after natural disasters: Guidance for family therapist. *The American Journal of Family Therapy: Research and Practice*, 36, 79-93.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (2016). *Disaster Declarations for 2015*. Retrieved from <https://www.fema.gov/disasters/grid/year/2015>.
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2006). *Weather Hazards for 2005*. Retrieved from <http://www.noaa.gov/weather>

Understanding Disaster Relief

Walter R. Hughes

In taking this course, the counseling practice of “meeting people where they are” has given me a new perspective and a deeper understanding of what that particular statement really means. There are so many ways to “meet people where they are,” but I think one of the most important ways this can be done is when you stand with someone when a horrific, traumatic, life altering event happens. A disaster can be just that event in their life that disrupts and disturb every aspect of their being. How does one handle the crisis? How does one function and cope with the devastation that has just occurred around them? How does one process what has just happened to them? How does one navigate through the process? What is the next step? These are the questions that many victims of a natural disaster may ask. The American Red Cross disaster relief helps to answer those questions.

Disaster relief refers to the process of responding to a catastrophic situation and providing humanitarian aid to persons and communities who have suffered from some form of disaster. The American Red Cross is a prime example of a humanitarian organization that provides emergency assistance and disaster relief. Disaster relief seeks to contain or mitigate the effects of a disastrous event to prevent any further loss of life or property. Relief operations restore order in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The goal is

to re-establishes normalcy through reconstruction and rehabilitation shortly after a disaster. Disaster relief helps in saving and protecting human life, relieving suffering, and containing the emergency. Disasters have a major and long-lasting impact on people long after the immediate effect has been mitigated. Any interruption in services can seriously affect the health, social, and economic outcomes of the community. Therefore, disaster relief operations must be excellently planned. Poorly planned relief activities can have a significant negative impact not only on the disaster victims, but also on relief volunteers.

Disaster Relief Roles

As a disaster relief volunteer, whether clinical or non-clinical, the role is intended to address the immediate, disaster-caused needs of individuals and families (including household pets). This occurs through the provision of essential services such as sheltering, feeding, basic first aid, bulk distribution of needed items, immediate health, emotional and spiritual care services, access to information, and the Safe and Well Linking services to people affected by disaster. In these volunteer roles, the main goal is to help a devastated community recover. Volunteers are some of the most important individuals in helping to deliver care services to people who may be traumatized by their circumstance or by what they have just experienced.

Sheltering involves organizing and

maintaining shelters for people in experiencing a disaster crisis. Sheltering consists of setting up, maintaining, and breaking down the area in buildings that are used for disaster relief. Another volunteer service is feeding. Feeding includes helping to ensure those in crisis are getting food and water. It is distributing food in a responsive, transparent, and equitable manner. Every effort should be made to ensure meals meet the cultural, ethnic, religious, and dietary needs of the affected individuals. It is helping those who need care maintain proper health and nutrition. Emotional and spiritual care can be given by a mental health clinician or clergy. In this role, one helps the individual cope with the traumatic experiences that have just occurred in their life. One provides care, reassurance, and hope.

In whatever role one decides fulfill, it is essential to ensure that the care needs of all those affected by disasters are properly organized, maintained, and sufficient in their delivery to the victims of disasters. Whatever care we provide, we must provide it with dignity and respect, in a non-judgmental, confidential and nondiscriminatory manner. As a volunteer, we provide a safe place for individuals and families. We must have respect for the cultural and religious differences of residents and ensure it will be maintained.

Training Areas

The training area of focus for me was the Diversity Sensitivity and Awareness training.

This training provided me with insight into the culture Red Cross tries to foster within its organization and in how the Red Cross wants its volunteers to relate and interact with the many diverse people they help. As a counselor, understanding diversity and being culturally sensitive are essential in delivery of services. If Red Cross volunteers are going to engage with the community, they must continue to focus on this belief and standard. The training provided clarity on the interrelated dimensions of human identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, socio-economic status, nationality, citizenship, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and age.

I think understanding diversity ties the community together. I think what matters most is not how much knowledge you maintain, but how effective you are in transferring your knowledge to others. I believe one must continuously check ones internal biases, as many times as necessary, so that one continues to understand others. One must also make sure one is being understood. Addressing the needs of a diverse population starts with awareness of diversity and a proactive attitude to cultural sensitivity. I believe awareness is formed in our openness to change and our commitment to learn from other viewpoints. We must be intentional in our eagerness to better understand differences and our commitment to interact with the diversity of cultures and groups in our community. Whether one's role as a Red Cross volunteer is clinical or non-clinical, we

must be committed in our approach to understanding the community we serve and the people who need us in the low moments of their lives.

The other training area of focus for me was the Restoring Family Link training. It provided an introduction to the tasks and responsibilities of Safe and Well Linking workers at a local response and a larger disaster operation. Safe and Well Linking workers help people within the disaster area notify their loved ones to inform them they are safe, help reconnect people separated by the disaster, and search for missing people within the disaster area who have serious health or mental health conditions. In my opinion, this training is essential in working with the families of missing persons. It provides help that is crucial that affect the mental and emotional state of all those involved. The anxiety and stress one feels when a relative is missing can be unbearable. However, volunteers are there to help every step of the way as families deal with the uncertainty of missing family members. No matter what physical help is given, the emotional and mental strain of dealing with the uncertainty and status of missing family members can take its toll on family members.

This training was thorough and I believe beneficial in teaching volunteers how to help family members navigate through the system of searching for his or her missing family member(s). This training appealed to me. This may be my volunteer focus area. This training piqued my interest, and I believe where I

would find fulfillment in working with families in crisis who are looking for missing family members.

Implications for the Counseling Profession

As counselors, we know that disasters are associated with destruction as well as loss of loved ones and irreplaceable belongings. This often overwhelms one's normal coping capacity. Disasters also tend to stress one's emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physiological, and religious or spiritual beliefs. As a result, counselors must develop and present different options of how to deal with disaster trauma and stress. They need to ensure that stress management skills that are introduced are culturally sensitive and appropriate. Counselor should also make sure stress management techniques are presented with care. They must understand that some of the suggestions might not be helpful or possible. Therefore, they should explore with the disaster victims other stress management techniques that might work specifically for them. Counselors should be at the forefront of being involved a disaster relief and providing disaster relief for victims of disaster. \It is my hope that the counseling profession will promote our necessary involvement and participation in disaster relief

Reference

<http://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief>

The Provision of Acute Interventions by Counselors during Disasters

Shatel M. Francis

Disaster relief is a set of structured responses by individuals and organizations who provide altruistic assistance to those who have been affected by natural and man-made disasters. At first glance, disaster survivors may seem to only need relief regarding material possessions. However, research supports that disasters may also have a profound impact on the psychological resources of survivors (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011; Norris et al., 2008). Therefore various community organizations have created multiple opportunities in which individuals can help communities prepare for, and recover from, disasters. Most notably, the American Red Cross, in conjunction with its 90% volunteer workforce, seeks to make communities thrive in the face of adversity by building leaders through utilizing their strengths and providing training for their areas of vulnerability.

The American Red Cross provides disaster relief in 32 specialty areas across eight divisions including: Operations Management, Individual Client Services, Mass Care, External Relations, Information and Planning, Logistics, Staff Services and Disaster Services Technology. While mental health counselors can get involved in any of these specialty areas, only two will be highlighted in the current work - Individual Client Services and Mass Care - as they

closely align themselves with the training and skillset of counselors. Throughout the summer of 2016, I participated in several well-orchestrated trainings and events sponsored by the Red Cross. At each event or training, volunteer individuals and businesses were hailed for their commitment to the community and the organization. The American Red Cross recognized that although collaboration could often prove difficult, teamwork limited operation duplication, financial waste, and poor prioritizing. By utilizing technological resources, the agency was able to streamline the training process and enlist the resources of the immediate communities. Two trainings of note were Sheltering (a specialty area of Mass Care) and Psychological First Aid (a specialty area of Individual Client Services). Key points in both areas will be highlighted with the goal of encouraging mental health counselors to get involved within their communities with such tangible and needed opportunities.

Counselors in Individual Client Services

According to Stanley, Bulecza and Gopalani (2012), mental health professionals can support communities by helping to identify and develop local psychosocial resources. Allowing the community itself to participate in the preparation and recovery processes surrounding disaster serves to empower the community and diminish feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that community members may feel as a disaster occurs. Mental health professionals

are specifically trained to value the dignity and worth of individuals and bolster human relationships. Thus having mental health counselors on the frontline, and behind the scenes of relief operations, serves only to further strengthen communities affected by disasters.

Although disaster mental health volunteer counselors cannot provide ongoing care to disaster survivors while deployed, they possess the ability to provide acute services that lessen immediate emotional and psychological distress and diminish long-term consequences. One training first developed by the Terrorism Disaster Branch of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network and the National Center for PTSD that can aid in acute services is called Psychological First Aid (PFA) (Briere & Scott, 2015). PFA functions as a triage system which assigns degrees of urgency to survivors.

Utilizing the principles of care, comfort and support, counselors are able to quickly assess the needs of community members and allow a safe space for traumatized individuals to discuss their experiences. Counselors uphold the American Counseling Association ethical standard of Professional Responsibility through the American Red Cross values of commitment, creativity, and compassion. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2014) reflects that “Counselors are expected to advocate to promote changes at the individual, group, institutional, and societal levels that improve the quality of life for individuals and groups

and remove potential barriers to the provision or access of appropriate services being offered.” (pg. 8). By providing PFA to survivors, counselors give practical and realistic assistance to immediate needs of the community, while also serving as a conduit to local resources that allow the community to rebound and thrive using their own capacities.

Counselors in Mass Care Efforts

Counselors are not, however, confined to providing assistance to the mental health needs of the community. Provider agencies such as the American Red Cross recognize the difficulty in providing mental health services under varied constraints such as open locations with little privacy and substantial time constraints. Thus counselors may choose to provide disaster relief in other ways. I experienced a sheltering training this semester which focused on the congregate needs of those displaced by disasters. Shelters mimic the demographics of the affected community itself, with vast diversity reflected in age, ethnicity, lifestyle and socioeconomic status. As such, they can be intimidating, uncomfortable, loud, and traumatizing for those who have already experienced a life-altering event. Training shelter staff to be aware of such parameters and how to deal with these stressful conditions assist with ensuring safety and creating stability amongst the chaos. Red Cross shelters provide safe housing, warm meals, and essential relief supplies, as well as emotional support and health services. Therefore it combines the

skills of many community leaders and volunteer support staff.

Mental health professional training can be used within the shelter to ensure that the challenges faced by community members are heard. As disaster survivors deal with the stress of being displaced from their homes, possible loss of family members, lack of privacy, beginning to recover from the disaster emotionally and financially, and limited access to resources, counselors can use the shelter environment to meet one-on-one with families to develop individual plans and identify available resources to help aid recovery. Additionally, counselors are in a unique position to advocate for the fair treatment of all those affected by a disaster.

The ACA Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) reflects that both “privileged and marginalized counselors intervene with, and on behalf, of clients at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international/global levels” (p. 11). While agencies may seek to treat survivors equally across the board, some survivors may possess special needs that are overlooked due to a lack of awareness of the part of large corporations or agencies who have had limited interaction with marginalized populations. Therefore, counselors can employ empowerment-based theories to address overlooked needs and assist special populations in being able to advocate for themselves both during and after the disaster.

Implications for Counselors

Disasters pose a threat to a community’s ability to protect itself. Communities that are able to prepare thoroughly and comprehensively may adapt better to the post-disaster recovery process. However, not all communities can adequately prepare itself based on various contributing factors such as the type and timing of the disaster, the amount of damage caused to the infrastructure of homes and business, and the efficiency of relief operations. Therefore disaster relief should be a “holistic, multi-dimensional integrated community approach of health promotion, disaster prevention, preparedness and mitigation” (Math, Nirmala, Moirangthem, & Kumar, 2015, pg. 1).

Whereas many responders have a clearly defined role, mental health professionals wear multiple hats and should be present from the preparation phase. According to Math, Nirmala, Moirangthem, and Kumar (2015), disaster mental health counselors function in a “multi-dimensional role from educating, training, negotiating, administrative, [and] fund raising, [to] collaborative skill transferring, treating, advocating and rehabilitating” (pg. 5). Thus not only is more training needed for counselors currently doing disaster work but more counselors should be made aware of the many opportunities currently available for their skillset.

Counselors are equipped to monitor existing conditions of disaster survivors as well as provide psychosocial support to those

acutely affected. Moreover, disaster counselors can provide assistance to frontline recovery staff by making recommendations regarding shift hours, ensuring that breaks and days off are taken, and reassigning staff who are struggling with their work. The implications for counselors are great. Knowledge, skills, awareness and action must be explored and understood by all mental health professionals so that in the event of a disaster, natural or man-made, professionals know where their services can be utilized. Flexibility in these roles is paramount as disasters are unpredictable and individual responses are varied.

Research is available that supports the presence of mental health counselors in relief efforts. Moreover, newer research has begun focusing on specific techniques that can be used by clinicians to help survivors build social connections post-disaster (Brier & Scott, 2015). Counselors are faced with a unique opportunity to establish best practices for reversing feelings of disconnection and isolation post-trauma in an arena where research is visibly lacking.

References

- American Counseling Association (2014). *ACA code of ethics*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Briere, J. & Scott, C. (2014). *Principles of trauma therapy-DSM-v update edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hawkins, R. L., & Maurer, K. (2011). "You fix my community, you have fixed my life": The disruption and rebuilding of ontological security in New Orleans. *Disasters*, 35(1), 143–159.
- Math, S. B., Nirmala, M. C., Moirangthem, S., & Kumar, N. C. (2015). Disaster management: Mental health perspective. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 37(3), 261-271. doi: 10.4103/0253-7176.162915
- Norris, F. H., Stevens, S. P., Pfefferbaum, B., Wyche, K. F., & Pfefferbaum, R. L. (2008). Community resilience as a metaphor, theory, set of capacities, and strategy for disaster readiness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41, 127–150.
- Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2015). Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies: Guidelines for the counseling profession. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 44(1), 28-48. doi:10.1002/jmcd.12035
- Stanley, S. A., Bulecza, S., & Gopalani, S. V. (2012). Psychological impact of disasters on communities. *Annual Review of Nursing Research*, 30(1), 89–123.

A Reflection on Disaster Relief

Natalie Segovia

According to the Red Cross there are nearly 70,000 disasters every year (American Red Cross, 2016). Disaster relief involves other individuals providing support to those who are faced with the crisis by responding to various disasters (Red Cross, 2016). Often times individuals are left to deal with the consequences of the different disasters. The Red Cross promotes, and recruits volunteers to provide, disaster relief. Disaster relief involves providing a wide range of services that allow comfort and care to be delivered at the times when individuals experience a crisis. In addition, disaster relief is another way in which individuals can help make a difference in a community.

Disaster relief is needed in times of crisis when individuals find themselves in situations where they have urgent needs ranging from needing clean water, safe shelter, hot meals, and support from others in the community. The disasters experienced can range from small house fires to multi-state natural disasters. Relief is provided everywhere that it is needed, at the times when people may need it the most. Relief operations are designed to assist survivors of a disaster with receiving help in dealing with their immediate crisis in such a way that maintains their dignity and helps build community relationships through the support, resources, and services provided. A distinctive

characteristic of disaster relief is that the main goal is to provide and adapt services to meet the needs of the people being served.

Disaster relief can be provided by individuals from the community that come from a wide range of different backgrounds, cultures, and professions. Aside from the Red Cross, there are a variety of other organizations that provide disaster relief who also rely on the service of volunteers. The Red Cross (2016) reports that approximately 95% of their disaster relief works are volunteers.

Although volunteers are able to provide a wide array of services, certain professions prepare individuals to deliver more specific services based on their expertise. For example, independently licensed professional counselors and licensed or certified school counselors can offer mental health volunteer services to individuals experiencing crises after exposure to a disaster. The counselor who serves as a disaster mental health worker (DMH) is designated to provide emotional support, as well as to help people cope after a disaster has occurred (Red Cross, 2016). Initially the role of the disaster mental health worker existed to provide support on a disaster relief operation, but has expanded to meet different types of needs including mental health support after different types of violence. For example, the use of DMH workers are beneficial during events such as Hurricane Katrina, the Oklahoma bombings, and the shootings in Newton, CT (Red Cross, 2016). The Red Cross emphasizes the use of

DMH. The expansion of outreach is in great part due to increased awareness regarding the psychological impact of traumatic and disaster-related events. As such, the contributions and services a DMH volunteer can offer have become increasingly important. Counselors who are not yet fully licensed can still provide valuable emotional support by using tools such as those learned from their training in psychological first aid.

The DMH volunteers are able to respond and assist at the local level supporting smaller responses like storm-related events or house fires. However, they can also be deployed to larger relief operations in different parts of the country. This option allows for a wider outreach. Aside from counselors being able to provide specific mental health services due to their specific training, they are also able to volunteer in other areas where they may be needed in order to provide disaster relief. Providing disaster relief is a team effort and through the different services and needs counselors can find an area to serve in. A counselor can volunteer to serve in the areas they are interested in provided they meet the training requirements and are willing to provide the services.

In order to provide disaster relief, an individual must complete specific trainings prior to providing services. These trainings prepare individuals to offer the necessary services. One of the required trainings is Psychological First Aid (PFA), which serves to provide a framework for understanding factors that affect the stress responses of

disaster relief workers and the clients they serve. For counselor, completing the PFA training can serve as additional training for best practice when providing disaster relief to clients. PFA provides the structure to allow volunteers, including counselors who are not yet fully licensed, to be able to recognize medical emergencies, decide if they can help, and then determine what actions to take. PFA teaches volunteers to assess what a person might need at a particular time, help create a compassionate environment for disaster survivors and workers, and help provide immediate support to those in stressful situations.

Another important training is the Disaster Action Team Workshop which covers full training for a volunteer to be on a disaster action team (DAT). The DAT workshop prepares volunteers to be able to respond as a full team member by knowing what steps to follow, what specific services to provide, and how to appropriately carryout services provided during disaster relief. The DAT workshop teaches participants the proper disaster relief procedures how to approach individuals affected by disasters, and services provided in the community.

Disaster relief is vital in helping others work through the devastation that a disaster can cause in someone's life. Counselors are poised to offer disaster relief because of their training. Counselors could in the future play a vital role in providing disaster relief because the role of the DMH is becoming increasingly important and necessary. As such, it is

appropriate that future counselors are exposed to disaster relief with the hope of spreading awareness and recruiting more counselors to offer support to the community. Fortunately because counselors already possess the skills, the focus should be to bring more awareness about disaster relief and promoting counselors to become advocates for the importance of providing disaster relief.

Reference

American Red Cross (n.d). Help Those Affected by Disasters. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/mo2>

Disaster: What Is It, How Do We Handle It?

Rajeive A. Manradgh

What is a disaster? This eight-letter word can be defined in various manners. I define it as something that happens very sudden or abrupt, which can cause some sort of damage or result in the loss of lives. Whatever meaning is applied to this word, the connotation is usually negative. Therefore, various agencies, partnerships, and organizations have set out to provide some sort of relief to individuals impacted by these sudden events. Put together, these organizations provide for disaster relief.

One of the biggest organizations that provides such disaster relief is the Red Cross. The American Red Cross has expressly noted that their disaster relief takes place ‘all day, every day, whenever someone needs us (American, 2016).’ This slogan conveys that the American Red Cross does not stop or wait, just as disasters do not wait or stop for anyone. Disaster relief helps to ensure that those affected by the calamity or sudden event are first cared for and provided with the most basic of needs: food, water, shelter, and clothing. The American Red Cross responds to an emergency every eight minutes; in addition, the American Red Cross has over 65,000 disaster responses yearly (American Red Cross, 2016).

The Red Cross is able to accomplish its goals of ensuring that certain duties,

regarding care, are fulfilled for these individuals. According to their website, the American Red Cross achieves its goal of disaster relief by distribution of emergency supplies, health and mental health contacts, meals and snacks, workers, and emergency response vehicles (American, 2016). These core elements help to alleviate the disaster and also seem to provide a sense of hope to those who seem to be in the most hopeless of situations. One of the services that the American Red Cross provides during disaster relief are the overnight shelter stays. Flexibility and adaptability to any type of disaster can also help in making sure that the disaster is relieved in the most appropriate method possible.

There are a myriad of ways that counselors volunteer for disaster relief. One of the areas of relief service that counselors can participate in is disaster mental health, where they will have varying duties. These volunteer counselors could go out into the community or site of a disaster and serve as an individual who is checking in with those who have been directly affected by the disaster. Although they do not necessarily have the opportunity to provide tradition ongoing counseling or maybe have the most ideal conditions, this ‘checking in process’ with those affected can potentially assist with identifying whether or not these individuals need referrals to additional community services.

These counselors also have the opportunity to join a disaster action team

(DAT), which includes those individuals who are the first to respond to the actual disaster. This DAT is one of the many options offered to counselors. In addition, one of the most fundamental ways in which counselors can assist in disaster relief is case management and recovery planning. Due to the severity of some disasters, some families may not know how exactly to move on or what the next step is. Therefore, these counselors can serve, as liaisons with the community and assist with ensuring that proper services are in place once these individuals are able to return to their 'normal everyday life.'

Another area where counselors can serve, which I have received training on is shelter fundamentals. With various disasters, individuals have limited options of where they can stay or where to after a disaster-related loss of a house. Sometimes, these individuals must seek out a local shelter that is being managed by the American Red Cross. Due to the trauma that some individuals may be facing, counselors are needed in this shelter. Whether counselors are helping individuals with the registration process, helping them become prepped to stay in the shelter, or assisting with the case management process at the shelter, counselors are important. These counselors, as stated before, can also help in assisting these individuals with some degree of recovery planning while at the shelter.

I also received training on incident reports. Within the core of disaster relief there are incident reports to be filled out

appropriately and accurately, and counselors are amongst a group of individuals who could volunteer for such a duty. Incident reports require a lot of accuracy and detail. They also involve elements of case management, a skill with which counselors are familiar. The emphasis that counselors place on documentation as of utmost concern also aligns well with the that of incident reports, as these duties also stress very detailed documentation from trained volunteers.

Plausibility exists in the assertion that disaster relief will continue to open up opportunities for counselors in the future. There is a possibility that this will become a more widely practiced specialty area in the counseling profession. Counselors can effectively serve in several roles while volunteering at shelters. Disaster mental health counselors can meet with survivors at shelters in order to discuss their trauma, validate their pain, and plan for the future. Another future vision may involve counselors going out to these communities before the disaster occurs in order to ensure that members of the community are equipped with healthy coping skills to more effectively deal with the disaster that will come to the forefront. The infusion of counseling does seem to pose a bright future within the area of disaster relief, and it is only the beginning.

Relief from a disaster can come in a myriad of ways. Counselors are able to assist in disaster relief and can serve in a multitude of ways. Some of these duties do not need to necessarily involve typical "counseling

duties”, these include incident report writing or sheltering. However, the assistance is still provided in a therapeutic manner . There are numerous opportunities for counseling professionals to assist survivors of disasters. Disaster relief may be a new area of focus for counselors as a future vision.

Reference

American Red Cross (n.d). Help Those Affected by Disasters. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/mo2>

MERCER
UNIVERSITY

PENFIELD COLLEGE