



## Volunteer Network Activates in Wake of Recent Disasters

by Public Relations Staff

September 30, 2008—In the aftermath of recent hurricanes Hannah, Gustav, and Ike and tropical storm Fay, the American Psychological Association's (APA) Disaster Response Network (DRN) has been active in responding to calls for assistance. The DRN, a national network of psychologists with training in disaster response, offers pro bono assistance to relief workers and survivors in the wake of disasters.

In the storm-affected states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and Florida, DRN members have offered emotional support to survivors and helped relieve stress experienced by workers in Red Cross shelters. Several psychologists recruited by the American Red Cross have traveled across the country to assist with disaster operations in Texas and Louisiana.

DRN members have mobilized locally to offer crisis counseling to distressed residents who moved into community shelters following severe storm-related flooding and power outages in Illinois, Indiana and Ohio. In addition, members have worked at the American Red Cross (ARC) national call center in Virginia talking with callers and offering guidance and support to Red Cross workers who have fielded emergency calls.

In a few large shelters in Texas, ARC is piloting a disaster mental health triage system, "PsyStart" created by APA and DRN member Dr. Merritt (Chip) D. Schreiber. Dr. Schreiber presented information to DRN Coordinators about PsyStart at the APA Practice Organization State Leadership Conference last March.

DRN members and other mental health professionals are recording information about exposure to disaster events as reported by shelter residents -- such as whether they have a missing family member, observed injury or death or felt a direct threat to their own life, and other variables. The data are being used to assess mental health needs and to help move more disaster mental health professionals as indicated into shelters with traumatized survivors.

In states outside the storm-affected region, DRN members have offered ARC's Foundations of Disaster Mental Health (FDMH) training (required of disaster mental health volunteers) and ARC's Psychological First Aid training (required of all ARC volunteers) that teaches common reactions to disaster and basic resilience skills. DRN members also have worked at local Red Cross chapters preparing new volunteers for out-of-state assignments, offering support to returning volunteers post-assignment, and aiding chapter staff in addressing heightened workload and stress.

### Cooperation Between Relief Organizations and Federal Agencies

There has been considerable collaboration and cooperation between disaster relief organizations including the Red Cross and federal government agencies in offering assistance following the recent storms.

Psychologists who work for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response (ASPR) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have been actively involved in helping coordinate the federal response to mental health needs.

APA members who are federal employees have participated in relief operations with the National Disaster Medical System (Disaster Medical Assistance Teams) and through the United States Public Health Service (USPHS), both under the leadership of ASPR.

Many of these psychologists have provided disaster mental health assistance to survivors at federal medical shelters in Texas and Louisiana and have worked at operation centers to assess mental health needs and ensure that federal support is available and well-coordinated. Mental health professionals with USPHS have been using the PsyStart system to assess psychological needs and target response efforts.

### Disaster Response Activities in the Weeks Ahead

DRN members will continue to work on Hurricane Ike relief operations that are expected to continue for several more



months. Additional volunteers are being actively recruited as the initial wave of volunteers completes its assignment and heads home. DRN members traveling to the Gulf Coast region are being asked to commit to a 14-day assignment.

Further, the American Red Cross is recruiting DRN members who are university faculty to provide disaster mental health assistance at shelters in Texas assisted by up to five graduate students.

The DRN program is also helping to identify licensed psychologists who may be interested in taking disaster training in the coming weeks and being deployed to the Gulf Coast region to aid hurricane relief operations.

Interested psychologists are encouraged to contact DRN Director Margie Schroeder at [mschroeder@apa.org](mailto:mschroeder@apa.org).

## Helping the Military and Their Families

The ARC national headquarters selected several DRN members to participate in the debut of a “Psychological First Aid for Military and Families” course. Psychologists and other mental health professionals active in ARC’s disaster mental health operations will teach resilience skills and ways to manage life’s adversities common after military deployment.

ARC plans to make a “Neighbor to Neighbor” version of this training available to Gulf Coast residents later this fall to help them address challenges they may face in rebuilding after the storms.

## Multicultural Awareness Emphasized

In the months between disasters, DRN members regularly obtain new information and training, with an emphasis on preparing to work with diverse populations.

DRN members and APA’s Public Education Campaign coordinators have spent several months developing a cultural awareness resource with the help of Dr. Josephine Johnson of Michigan, who leads the APA Task Force on the Implementation of Multicultural Guidelines and the Committee for the Advancement of Professional Practice’s Diversity Working Group.

This resource, specifically geared for psychologists who engage in community outreach, helps equip individuals for work with diverse populations in disaster relief operations as well as in psycho-educational settings. DRN members have a working knowledge of this resource as well as APA’s Multicultural Guidelines (<http://www.apa.org/pi/multiculturalguidelines>).

## Resources for the Public

The DRN program and APA’s Public Education Campaign have worked together in recent weeks to revise and post new resources to the APA Help Center ([apahelpcenter.org](http://apahelpcenter.org)) for the public to use in managing hurricane-related distress.

These materials include:

- Tips to Strengthen Your Emotional Well Being Prior to the Arrival of a Hurricane:  
<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=182>
- Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Managing Distress Related to Hurricanes  
<http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=181>
- Managing Traumatic Stress: Dealing with Hurricanes from Afar  
<http://apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=183>