



DHS Emergency Response to a Crisis

The DHS Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) and other public and private service providers in Allegheny County have been part of an evolving process that is tested without warning and without prescribed limits. Prior to the 1994 crash of USAir Flight 427 that killed 132 people, measures to respond in a prompt and effective way to disaster were already being formulated by OBH. The intervening years have witnessed a cooperative effort of impressive proportions. As would be expected during these times of uncertainty, the process is on-going.

When community crises occur and the County's Emergency Operation Center (EOC) becomes involved—or at the request of others—the OBH Bureau of Adult Mental Health Administrator assumes the role of OBH point person during the crisis. Natural disasters, hazardous materials spills, mass transportation disasters, fires with significant losses and acts of violence including terrorism each trigger a chain reaction of readiness that originates in the EOC and flows through DHS. As the point person, the OBH Administrator determines the level of necessary involvement and calls go out to OBH Service Coordination Units (SCUs) with dictates for specific mental health responders to meet the needs of the individuals affected by the disaster.

Culturally competent and community-based providers, clergy and a host of appropriate mental health professionals, all of whom have been trained in emergency response, either remain on alert or are dispatched to the scene if the needs are immediate. Once on the scene, workers first set out to assess the needs of the individuals and community affected by the disaster. Once in conversation with those with direct involvement, they emphasize that the reactions that they may be experiencing are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

As the crisis becomes more controlled, individuals who seem particularly troubled are identified and referred for follow-up care. At a minimum, contact numbers for mental health hotlines, the OBH/Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic (WPIC) re:solve Crisis Network and CONTACT Pittsburgh are distributed at the scene. The OBH [Where to Call Directory of Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol Services](#), available on the DHS website, has a complete listing of all mental health and related service providers in the county.

Sharing information and generating ideas through cooperative effort has given southwestern Pennsylvania a coordinated network of emergency response providers—a network that is expanded and strengthened through broadly inclusive meetings.

Ever vigilant about the consistency of information, service providers participate in quarterly meetings that discuss new protocols, policies and procedures specific to Allegheny County as well as any incidents occurring during the three-month interim.

OBH participates in the coordination of mental health supports for the Region 13 Terrorism Task Force mental health supports and the 13-county Behavioral Health and Chaplain Disaster Response and Recovery (BHCDRR) meetings. The meetings bring together behavioral health professionals from 13 county governments, Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) teams, the Red Cross, the Center for Victims of Violence and Crime (CVVC), the Salvation Army, the United Way, Allegheny County Health Choices (ACHC), the Community Care Behavioral Health Organization (CCBHO), chaplains, and psychiatrists. In all, more than 60 behavioral health specialists and more than 10

chaplains are invited to share their knowledge and ideas to develop comprehensive plans to meet the needs of various populations. Subcommittees of specialists plan for the well-being of specific populations such as individuals with special medical needs and children.

A still broader range of medical and emergency professionals from the 13 counties of southwestern Pennsylvania—the Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS)—meet periodically to plan for a coordinated response in case of a regional disaster. In addition to the mental health professionals who attend the BHCDRR meetings, representatives of the region’s hospitals, surveillance agencies, public health departments, coroner’s offices and National Guard also attend

Finally, the DHS Disaster Response Team conducts meetings with representatives from each of the DHS program and support offices that focus on critical response and coordination issues for staff, providers and the individuals that DHS serves.

Support services extended to those who help

Beyond the focus of providing support to individuals or communities directly affected by an emergency, there are also supports in place to aid “First Responders.” First Responders are those men and women who work in fire departments, police departments and emergency medical services (EMS). These men and women have access to Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM), a technique used to keep the lines of dialogue open following incidents that may threaten their mental health.

In cases such as the tragic loss of two firefighters and the injury of 28 others in 2004 and the loss of three Pittsburgh Police officers in 2009, CISM responders could be called to have a debriefing with the various police, fire and EMS departments that had been at those scenes. This debriefing provides the First Responders an opportunity to discuss in a confidential and structured format their involvement in the incident.

The team of CISM-trained professionals (includes a first responder and mental health professional) are trained to listen for signs that any First Responder is having significant problems dealing with the events at the disaster scene. If significant stress symptoms are detected, the mental health professional will return in several days to see how the First Responder is adjusting and may suggest further follow-up.

By keeping lines of communication open and responsive, and by anticipating the unpredictable, the emergency response community of Allegheny County and the surrounding counties of southwestern PA continue to plan for the events we all hope will never occur.