



Disasters bring behavioral needs

November 1, 2010

Evansville Courier and Press

In September, Disaster Preparedness Month was recognized across the nation. The following is an introduction to the available mental health services that Indiana and surrounding counties offer in times of disasters.

The Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addictions has set up 10 district behavioral health teams to respond to local and national disasters. These teams cover the following 12 counties in Southwestern Indiana: Crawford, Daviess, Dubois, Gibson, Knox, Martin, Pike, Posey, Perry, Spencer, Vanderburgh and Warrick.

Currently, there are 39 trained and licensed mental health professionals ready to respond in the event of a community disaster or national event. All team members must go through several National Incident Management Trainings and Psychological First Aid Training, and must be licensed in a mental health related field. Ongoing trainings, conferences and webinars are offered throughout the year to keep team members adequately trained and ready to respond. District 10 mental health team members also are part of the Indiana Homeland Security District 10 Task Force.

A disaster can be small or large in scale. Disasters include the events people normally consider, such as tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and winter storms. But man-made disasters, such as terrorist attacks, also severely impact communities.

Disasters can occur with or without warning. The type of disaster influences the duration and severity of psychological stress experienced by individuals and communities and the type of responses needed. Psychological

distress is a normal reaction to an abnormal or unusual situation.

According to the Indiana Office of Emergency Preparedness and Response, "For various reasons, some people in Indiana may be more vulnerable or at risk for experiencing distress as a result of disaster. A diverse pool of mental health professionals and community responders must be prepared and poised to act in a coordinated manner to adequately address the psychological and/or social needs of people impacted by disaster."

Everyone who witnesses a disaster is touched by it. Many different reactions — including behavioral, physical and emotional symptoms — can occur and can vary by individuals' ages.

Disaster mental health responders can help individuals and family members recognize and be prepared for symptoms that may occur.

It also is important to note that pre-existing problems can be exacerbated by a disaster.

After a disaster strikes, many people don't recognize the need for mental health assistance. Disaster mental health assistance offers practical interventions that target acute stress reactions and immediate needs.

Mental health responders are concerned about the needs of survivors as well as emergency responders.

In next week's article, we will take a look at psychological reactions and interventions for children ages 1 to 11 who have been involved in a disaster.

In the week following, we will provide information regarding how

disasters affect children ages 12 to 18 and adults.

Those interested in learning more or becoming part of the District Ten Mental Health Team may contact me for additional information.

This column was written by Jennifer Schuetter-Bromm, licensed clinical social worker with Southwestern Behavioral Healthcare, Inc. Contact the organization at (812) 436-4221 or comments@southwestern.org.