

## DISASTERS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A FACTSHEET FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS

**This factsheet provides an overview of disasters and domestic violence and describes strategies for how disaster responders and providers can assist families that experience disaster and domestic violence.**

### WHAT DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DISASTERS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- Domestic violence is a pattern of abuse and threatening behaviors used by one person in a relationship, typically to control the other person in the relationship.
- Domestic violence may increase in communities that experience disaster. This increase may be related to stressors experienced after a disaster, such as housing or employment losses. Such occurrences may result in a perpetrator feeling a loss of control, which may then be followed by the perpetrator using abusive behavior to try and gain back control in personal relationships. Domestic violence that is ongoing before a disaster may be exacerbated or may increase following a disaster.
- A disaster may have emotional, physiological, psychological, and spiritual effects on a family. When domestic violence occurs following a disaster it can further hinder a family's ability to recover from a disaster. For children, witnessing domestic violence can result in additional emotional or behavioral problems.
- Services and resources for those experiencing domestic violence should be integrated into disaster-related community services.
- Due to the potential for an increase in domestic violence following a disaster, disaster responders and providers should be aware of the additional safety concerns and needs of families experiencing domestic violence.



### DISASTERS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- » After Hurricane Andrew in Miami, domestic violence calls to the community helpline increased by 50%.
- » Following the 1993 floods in Missouri, the average state rate of turning away persons seeking services at domestic violence shelters increased 111% compared to the preceding year.
- » Following Hurricane Katrina, domestic violence increased by 45%.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISASTER RESPONDERS AND PROVIDERS

### BEFORE A DISASTER

- **Learn about domestic violence.** Disaster responders and providers should:
  - » *Know what domestic violence is.* Domestic violence may include being threatened, pushed, kicked, punched, shamed, belittled, intimidated, or prevented from seeing family and friends.
  - » *Understand the potential health consequences of domestic violence on individuals and families.* Health consequences may include injuries, stress related physical illnesses, fatalities, or mental health problems.
  - » *Know the emotional and social effects of domestic violence.* Emotional and social effects may include fear, anxiety, panic attacks, withdrawal, depression, shame, feeling hopeless, or social isolation.
  - » *Identify where survivors can get help.* Community domestic violence programs and organizations may provide support, services, and housing for individuals and families experiencing domestic violence.
- **Include a domestic violence focus in interagency disaster response networks.** Solicit active involvement from all sectors of the community to help provide resources and support needed by families experiencing a disaster and domestic violence. Essential partners to include from the community are domestic violence shelters and coalitions; law enforcement; emergency management; and business, religious, media, and government sectors.
- **Assist domestic violence shelters in developing and reviewing their disaster plans.** Provide domestic

violence shelter staff with disaster training and assistance as needed. Assist in developing disaster preparedness and evacuation plans for shelter residents and staff.

### DURING A DISASTER

- **Establish a uniform and well-known protocol for domestic violence reporting and response.** This protocol should be developed by and communicated clearly among domestic violence service providers, local law enforcement and justice officials, and other emergency and disaster response providers.
- **Identify safe and secure shelter options for families experiencing disaster and domestic violence.** Mass care emergency shelters may compromise the safety of domestic violence victims and their children and alternative shelter options may need to be considered. Types of safe and secure housing options include:
  - » A physical shelter facility operated by a domestic violence program that serves victims of domestic violence.
  - » A safe home provided by a victim's family member or friend.
  - » Other accommodations, such as time-limited motel or hotel placement, or other direct placement programs providing safe housing. These accommodations should have a telephone and bathroom facilities and all doors to the accommodations should have locks.
- **Ensure children's services are available for families experiencing disaster and domestic violence.** Provide safe play areas for children and provide information and resources for parents about how to help their children following exposure to disasters and domestic violence.
- **Distribute telephone numbers for local domestic violence shelters and national providers such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE.** Post hotline numbers and resources visibly in emergency mass care and shelter areas.
- **Know what to say if a domestic violence victim tells you that domestic violence has occurred or is occurring.** Some recommendations include:
  - » *Believe and respect the information told to you.* Remember that even if some of the incidents described to you by a domestic violence victim do not seem to make sense or fit together your job is to provide support and safety for that person. You might say: "I appreciate you sharing this with me. I want to do all that I can to make sure you and your children are safe."

- » *Tell the victim that you care about his or her safety.* You might say: “I am worried about your safety. I can help you access resources in the community for protection and support.”
- » *Never blame the victim for the abuse.* You might say: “You are not responsible for this violent behavior. It is not your fault that he/she treats you this way.”
- » *Respect the victim’s choices.* You might say: “I support your choices. My support is not contingent on what you decide to do.”



## AFTER A DISASTER

- **Raise public awareness about domestic violence.** Work with domestic violence programs and organizations, law enforcement, and other partners to determine key public information messages to be disseminated throughout the community affected by disaster. These messages might include domestic violence prevention strategies and domestic violence reporting procedures. Distribute this information in shelters and other locations using fliers, posters, billboards, TV and radio advertisements, word-of-mouth, and social media.
- **Connect domestic violence and disaster survivors to long-term recovery resources.** Include information on accessing resources and services such as housing, childcare, transportation, medical services, mental health services, substance abuse treatment, legal aid, law enforcement, and social support groups.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

National Domestic Violence Helpline - <http://www.thehotline.org/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network - <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/domestic-violence>

### DISASTERS AND FAMILIES

Disaster Distress Helpline - <http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network - <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters>

U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration - <http://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/?from=carousel&position=1&date=02282012>

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This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The views, opinions, and content are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.