

Responding to Hurricane Ike
Roberta Flynn, Psy.D., Chair of SDPA Disaster Response Committee
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In September, 2008, I responded to Hurricane Ike through the San Diego - Imperial County Chapter of the American Red Cross. It was my first national deployment; when you are in the system as “available,” you must be ready to deploy within 24 hours. I had spent the previous week in my function as a Disaster Mental Health volunteer, at the American Red Cross Chapter headquarters in San Diego, screening volunteers who wanted to deploy. It is important to be sure those volunteers are doing it for the right reasons. We wouldn’t want a new parent wanting a break from the constant care of a newborn, or someone who is the sole caretaker for an elderly parent leaving without a replacement. I found most were there for the right reasons and had a good understanding of the hardships they might face during deployment.

I explored practical questions with these volunteers; who was going to be left at home, how duties were divided and what arrangements they’d made for emergencies while they were deployed. The thing about disasters is they are usually not predictable. Hurricanes provide a little more lead time, while tornadoes or our wildfires may occur with little or no warning.

When I responded to Hurricane Ike, I first reported to the command center in Fort Worth, Texas. Several volunteers arrived with me late in the evening. We were directed to a huge abandoned warehouse with hundreds of cots set up. We slept on these cots, men on one side and women on the other. Within a couple of days I was sent with 2 other volunteers to Texarkana, Arkansas (1/2 of the town was in Texas). We slept in the garage at the chapter headquarters. In Texarkana, we provided disaster mental health services at 19 faith-based shelters. The Red Cross was in a supportive role of providing cots, food and personnel where needed. Most of the residents at these shelters had to leave their homes with often less than two hours to gather what they wanted to bring. Many had just returned to their homes after being evacuated for Hurricane Gustav. Most in these shelters were very poor and grateful to have someone to listen to them.

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There was little we could do as Disaster Mental Health volunteers to change their circumstances or provide any assurance that their houses would still be standing or that pets left behind would be alive.

After several days, I was sent to Houston and spent all of my time working 12 hour shifts in a mega shelter. It was located in an area of town without electricity (and that created interesting problems). Volunteers reporting to this shelter had to travel, often long distances on freeways and surface roads without streetlights or other lights that would orient them to their surroundings. Houston has several circular highway systems surrounding the city and many toll roads. It is larger than San Diego and without electricity, it was impossible to know where you were and if it was even safe to pull off the road to read the map. I'm usually pretty good using maps, but we didn't have complete maps either, since many of the stores were still closed. After a couple of days traveling in circles in the dark, I bought a GPS system. It made for interesting stories of our travels. I felt sorry for two nurses that were definitely directionally challenged.

The shelter was powered by generators on tractor-trailer trucks. The state police/ Texas Rangers secured the inside and Houston police provided outside security. There were numerous challenges. The shelter was divided into sections for families, single women and single men. There were also large populations of special needs clients. In this shelter with a capacity of 2500, I discovered several had been displaced by Hurricane Katrina and had remained in Houston after losing everything in New Orleans. When phones were available some shelter residents were able to make connections and move with family members or friends. Many had arrived with just the clothes on their backs.

Some of the men living in this shelter wanted to volunteer or work. Jobs were posted on a board and if they were ready at 4:45 am they would be picked up and transported to a job site. Those wanting to volunteer attended some basic Red Cross training courses. They were allowed to help in the shelter. It was their plan to obtain some job skills for when the city recovered. What a boost to their self esteem! What a help for shelter operations.

A chaplain for a sheriff's department in Florida obtained teddy bears from the Houston Police Department. Amazing how quickly the news travels in such a large place! The children seemed so resilient. They often adjusted much quicker than the adults. They did not have the worries and responsibilities of the adults.

January 24th, some members of the Disaster Response Committee took a course necessary to be deployed to national disasters. It will be an interesting experience for them if they continue their training. January 31st I took a supervisor's course. More supervisors are needed in the San Diego - Imperial County Chapter. It is not much fun spending a whole Saturday in training, but again, disasters won't wait while we get training and experience.