

**Town of Stillwater**  
**Emergency Preparedness Plan**  
**Mental Health/Psychological First Aid Response**

This plan will cover four areas of emergency preparedness. Given the limited resources and number of mental health volunteers (MHV) available the plan is designed to meet the needs of the community in the following areas:

Emergency Shelters

Emergency Operations Center

Community-wide Education

Limited response following a disaster (Psychological First Aid or PFA)

**1. Emergency Shelter(s)**

Following a natural disaster or, for a limited time frame, a man-made disaster a shelter may be established. In the case of a natural disaster such as a hurricane, flood, or ice storm the shelter will primarily established to provide habilitative services (food, clothing, and shelter). Community members will use the shelter at a time when their psychological state is severely taxed. They may be preoccupied with thoughts of property damage or loss, the whereabouts and well-being of other family members, neighbors or pets, or a myriad of other concerns including continued physical well-being, financial, or recovery issues. The shelter can provide a place to regroup and gather their thoughts or it can be a chaotic and anxiety producing environment.

The goal of a mental health volunteer working in a shelter is to provide the following:

- A. Ensure the environment is conducive to increased calm and composure.
- B. Help maintain the basic family integrity and structure of each individual family group
- C. Understand how trauma impacts personal thinking, feeling, and acting and ensure that shelter staff and recipients are assisted in lowering their traumatic reactivity. Reactivity can take the form of re-experiencing the event through flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares, or other unwanted and prolonged thoughts about the event that get in the way of performing daily routines.

- D. Assist recipients in seeking out professional organizations designed to help recovery efforts such as the Red Cross.
- E. Perform duties that maintain the operations of the shelter (i.e. cooking, setting up beds, running errands, performing clerical duties, etc)

***ACTION ITEM***

Volunteers will be trained using an interactive 1-hour training session on *Disaster and Shelters*, a power point presentation that has been used to train Emergency Management Planning committee members in the past.

If the event(s) is a man-made disaster such as a school shooting the mental health volunteer(MHV) will be deployed to a Reception Center designated by Emergency Management Command. The volunteer(s) assigned to the Reception Center will act in concert with all police agency personnel and other First Responders. The primary duty of a MHV in an acute distress situation such as this would be;

- an active listener to those who wish to talk,
- provide concrete assistance such as food and coffee (if available), and
- a feedback loop to Emergency Management Officials about the tone and tenor of the recipients thoughts and needs.

At no time will the MHV attempt to provide professional advice, make statements about the intent, scope, or possible outcome of the event, or in any way act as spokesperson for Incident Command or any agency or community group, to recipients, other 1<sup>st</sup> Responders, or the media unless authorized by Emergency Management Officials.

***ACTION ITEM***

Volunteers will be trained using a DVD/Interactive 1-hour workshop *Disaster Preparedness and 10 Findings of School Shooters: A Secret Service Report*.

**2. Emergency Operations Center**

Whenever possible a senior MHV will be present at the Command Center during peak activity. Research has shown there is a high level of tension, anxiety, and trauma reactivity among support and rescue staff which is compounded if staff have experienced their own past traumatic incidents. Traumatic stress diminishes the ability of staff to think and act decisively and also contributes to emotional dysregulation (the ability to regulate and manage one's emotions).

The MHV will be available;

- to individual staff members if they are distressed or request assistance,
- make recommendations to Emergency Management regarding the environment's emotional reactivity and how to help restore calm
- the need for individuals to be mindful of their self-care (taking breaks, staying hydrated, time away, etc) and,
- consult with other mental health/social service providers as they come onto the scene regarding need assessment, resource allocation, type of assistance requested, and communication with Incident Command.

#### **ACTION ITEM**

Volunteers will be trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA) in a 10-hour training.

### **3. Community Education**

One of the greatest benefits of a mental response to emergency planning is in the education of the public as to what can happen and what they can do before, during, and following a disaster. Research has shown that post-traumatic stress can be mitigated to a large degree if people feel prepared for the event, to the extent that they can be, and have a plan of what they can do for themselves and their family members during and following an event.

Readiness, Response, and Recovery are stages of planning that each have specific tasks and activities aimed at helping people "weather the storm" and not develop prolonged psychological distress. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a potential problem that can seriously impact the psychological and physical health of individuals who were unprepared to manage a disaster or other event. Education can counter the effects of trauma while providing individuals with practical survival techniques and advice.

Organizations such as the Red Cross and the National Childhood Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offer a wide range of readiness, response, and recovery suggestions aimed at reducing psychological distress in adults and children.

#### **ACTION ITEM**

On a regular annual cycle the EMP will disseminate information to the public from the Red Cross, NCTSN, and other organizations with practical advice for what individuals can do in all three stages of a disaster. The EMP will:

- Annually present the Stillwater Central School District with copies of the Red Cross Coloring Book for discussion and dissemination to all students in that year's 5<sup>th</sup> Grade. The coloring book is designed to teach children

about what can be done during many natural disasters such as a hurricane. It is also a basic set of instructions for parents about those events. Students are encouraged to work with their teachers when completing the coloring book and then bring it home for their parents to see and read.

- Use PSA and Town/Village newsletters to regularly apprise the community of how they can prepare for natural disasters. Publish NCTSN and Red Cross materials that address developing a Family Preparedness Plan, What Helps/What Hurts following a natural disaster, and other materials.
- Capitalize on town-wide events such as Family Day to have information booths and materials that can be given out to attendees.
- MHVs will write and publish articles in local media describing the effects of trauma and recovery.

#### **4. Use of Psychological First Aid (PFA) following a disaster**

PFA is an evidence informed modular approach to help children, adolescents, adults, and families in the immediate aftermath of disaster and terrorism. PFA is designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning and coping.

PFA principles can also be employed in an Incident Command Center.

The objectives of PFA are:

- A. Establish a human connection in a non-intrusive, compassionate manner.
- B. Enhance immediate and on-going safety, and provide physical and emotional comfort.
- C. Calm and orient emotionally overwhelmed or distraught survivors.
- D. Help survivors to tell you specifically what their immediate needs and concerns are and gather additional information as appropriate.
- E. Offer practical assistance and information to help survivors address their immediate needs and concerns
- F. Connect survivors as soon as possible to social support networks, including family members, friends, neighbors, and community members
- G. Support adaptive coping, acknowledge coping efforts and strengths, and empower survivors to take an active role in their recovery
- H. Provide information that may help survivors cope effectively with the psychological impact of disasters

- I. Be clear about your availability, and (when appropriate) link the survivor to another member of a disaster response team or to local recovery systems, mental health services, public-sector services, and organizations.

**ACTION ITEM**

Volunteers will be trained in Psychological First Aid (PFA) in a 10-hour training.

**5. Activation of the Mental Health Volunteer Network**

During the initial stages of an anticipated event the Town's Mental Health Officer shall be an integral part of the preparedness planning efforts. In the event of a "without warning" event the Town's Mental Health Officer shall report to the community Emergency Operations Center to activate the mental health plan and to work with the Emergency Management staff to execute the plan to the extent required.

Submitted by: Dr. Joseph Benamati

12/14/12