

Volunteering for the American Red Cross

The American Red Cross continues to recruit mental health volunteers for disaster relief operations along the Atlantic seaboard and the gulf coast.

Volunteer mental health professionals should be prepared to:

- **Be patient and flexible.** Preparing disaster relief workers to respond in the aftermath of disaster can be extremely challenging. Mental health professionals should be prepared to register as volunteers with their local chapter. This might entail completing the paperwork necessary to establish a volunteer relationship with the Red Cross and provide documentation that verifies their professional credentials and training. The Red Cross places high value in getting the right people, to the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time.
- **Complete specific Red Cross training.** The Red Cross has a specific role in disaster response and disaster mental health volunteers are critical to carrying out that role. Prior to utilizing mental health professionals in the Red Cross chapter or on a disaster relief operation outside their local community, volunteers must receive adequate training and information to prepare them to carry out their duties and responsibilities. New volunteers may be required to take specific Red Cross training courses in Introduction to Disaster, Psychological First Aid, and Foundations in Disaster Mental Health in addition to others.
- **Provide non-traditional mental health services.** In the aftermath of disaster, intensive psychotherapy is often contraindicated. Instead, early intervention is primarily focused on assisting disaster survivors and response workers in meeting their most basic needs. This includes helping people feel safe and secure, obtain food and water, address their physical health needs (first aid and access to their medications) and connect to their family, friends, and other social support networks. Providing emotional comfort and support and helping individuals focus on their disaster-related needs is the most important mental health intervention you can provide at this time.
- **Support local Red Cross chapter activities.** Mental health volunteers can assist their local chapter with preparing Red Cross disaster relief works for out of state assignments, supporting the families of disaster relief workers out on assignment, providing supportive interventions to those returning from disaster relief operations, and conducting media interviews on the common reactions individuals experience in the aftermath of disaster. Mental health workers may also be called upon to assist with other chapter support duties such as answering phones, preparing meals, filing, etc. While not typically considered traditional mental health services, helping out with these activities can go a long way to preserving the mental health of other Red Cross workers and staff.

If you are interested in volunteering at your local chapter or for a disaster relief operation outside your community, please contact the Red Cross closest to you. To find your local Red Cross chapter go to the Chapter Locator website at www.redcross.org