

## Blueprint for Responding to Public Mental Health Needs in Times of Crisis

The shocking events of September 11, 2001 served as a “wake-up call” to the nation, driving home how vulnerable all of its citizens are to unforeseen and unheralded disasters. In addition to suffering grievous physical attacks, we collectively sustained an assault on our national psyche, raising lingering questions about the long-term impact on the mental health of untold numbers of Americans. The September 11th terrorist attacks followed by the postal mail-based anthrax attacks and the serial shootings in and around Washington, D.C., created fear and anxiety in millions of Americans. Not surprisingly, studies indicate that the prevalence of mental disorders among children and adults increased significantly in the wake of these tragic events.

**As a result, we have learned a hard lesson: State and local mental health systems are largely unprepared to respond effectively to events that traumatize communities.** These threats range from terrorist attacks and individual acts of violence (i.e.: school shootings) to natural disasters (i.e.: floods, fires and hurricanes). These disasters often devastate survivors, their friends and families, and the broader communities in which they live.

The good news is the severity of the **mental health consequences of these disasters can be reduced by comprehensive response planning** that addresses both short- and long-term mental health needs. To help communities prepare to meet the challenge of comprehensive disaster response planning, Mental Health America (MHA) has launched the Blueprint for Responding to Public Mental Health Needs in Times of Crisis project. This project includes a manual that addresses the consequences of disasters on mental health and how to prepare comprehensive plans to support response and recovery efforts. The manual consists of 11 modules focusing on assessing your community, developing a comprehensive response plan, working with special populations, and more.

In addition, MHA designed an intensive training and technical assistance program, which was piloted in six sites over a one-year period. The six MHA affiliates that participated in the pilot project were: MHA in El Paso County, Colo.; MHA of Westchester, N.Y.; MHA of East Tenn.; MHA in Ind.; MHA of the New River Valley, Va.; and MHA in Milwaukee County, Wis.

In addition to providing onsite training and intensive technical assistance, MHA provided each of the MHAs with a \$14,000 grant to develop and/or improve plans to address mental health planning and response. As a result of this pilot project, each of the six sites were able to increase awareness around the mental health consequences of disasters and many successfully improved plans to address mental health during and after a disaster situation.

For more information about the Blueprint pilot project, please contact the MHA Resource Center at 1-800-969-6642 or [email us](mailto:info@nmha.org). To order a Blueprint for Responding to Public Mental Health Needs in Times of Crisis manual, visit [www.nmha.org/bookstore](http://www.nmha.org/bookstore) or order via phone by calling MHA's publication office: 703-838-7531.

### For More Information:

For a free and confidential mental health screening, go on-line to [www.mhacolorado.org](http://www.mhacolorado.org).

