



November 8, 2012

**Guidance to EMS Systems on Force Protection and
Stress Management amid Hurricane Recovery Efforts**

With Hurricane Sandy and the related recovery work taking a toll on the first responder (emergency services) community, EMS systems in impacted areas along the Eastern Seaboard must take steps to ease the stress on their personnel, mitigate burnout and ensure that immediate challenges do not become long-term problems.

The importance of taking care of responders with empathy and support as they serve their communities cannot be overemphasized, especially in the aftermath of a catastrophic event such as Hurricane Sandy. EMS systems must limit the psychological fallout their personnel experience for the sake of compassion and to ensure the system can carry out its mission. To help safeguard the overall health of all their personnel, EMS systems should:

- Ensure that workers take regular breaks and get adequate (8 hours recommended) sleep.
- Rotate staff through difficult assignments to ensure the workload does not disproportionately fall on any one unit. Debrief staff as needed and as possible.
- Reduce shifts to normal hours as soon as possible.
- Encourage workers to eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water.
- Consider pairing experienced responders with less seasoned personnel.
- Encourage responders to stay in touch with their families and help them find ways to do so when communications systems are spotty or inoperable. Individuals experience less stress when they know the safety and wellbeing of loved ones.
- Insist that responders ask for help when they feel they need it. This is particularly necessary for those responders who themselves are directly impacted by the crisis.

EMS systems also must implement the fundamentals of “psychological first aid.” Specifically, system management and other personnel must be on the lookout for responders showing early signs of traumatic stress as it can be debilitating, especially if unrecognized and unsupported. They must be prepared to address minor issues as well as to recognize serious problems and to refer individuals to behavioral health specialists available in the community as appropriate.

Responders at greatest risk of developing a psychological issue, such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks or substance abuse, are those who are working persistent overtime and getting inadequate sleep.

Here are some helpful links for those responders that have been impacted by Hurricane Sandy:

Federal

FEMA Disaster Assistance: www.disasterassistance.gov, m.fema.gov (mobile), or call 1-800-621-3362. You can also text SHELTER + your ZIP code to 43362 (4FEMA) to find the nearest shelter in your area

American Redcross: <http://www.redcross.org/find-help>

USA.gov: <http://www.usa.gov/Topics/Weather/Hurricane.shtml>

State

New York: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/index.html>

New Jersey: http://www.state.nj.us/njoem/programs/sandy_recovery.html

Mental Health and Stress Management

Veterans Administrations Psychological First Aid App:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/PTSD/professional/manuals/psych-first-aid.asp>

CDC Disaster Mental Health Resources (scroll down to the First Responders Section):

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/>

SAMSHA Mental Health Resources for First Responders:

http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/dbhis/dbhis_responders_intro.asp

SAMSHA Tip sheet for Survivors of a Post Traumatic Stress Event:

<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/NMH05-0209R/NMH05-0209R.pdf>

SAMSHA Tip sheet for Survivors of a Post Traumatic Stress Event: What to Expect in Your Personal,

Family, Work, and Financial Life: <http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/NMH02-0139/NMH02-0139.pdf>

HHS APSR Behavioral Health Resources:

<http://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/abc/Pages/behavioralhealth.aspx>

IAFF Behavioral Health Resources:

<http://www.iaff.org/HS/wfiresource/BehavioralHealth/behavioralhealth.html>

IAFF Online Behavioral Wellness Manual:

<http://www.iaff.org/ET/JobAid/EAP/EAP.htm>

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