



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response



**Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach**

People experiencing homelessness typically have limited resources and likely have past exposure to traumatic events. Therefore, they may be at higher risk of adverse physical and psychological reactions following a public health emergency or disaster. Trauma-informed approaches can help disaster responders effectively serve homeless individuals and families.

A trauma-informed approach to disaster response acknowledges past trauma and the current impact it may have on the lives of anyone receiving services or support. Sensitivity to trauma can improve communication between responders and the homeless and facilitate compliance with public health directives.

**When Planning for Homeless Individuals and Families during Disaster:**

- Include people with expertise in providing services to the homeless in planning activities and exercises.
- Understand that homeless individuals and families often have a significant trauma history prior to an emergency.
- Educate service providers about trauma and how it impacts a person's physical and behavioral health.
  - Train providers to be mindful of common triggers for traumatic symptoms which include loud noises, small spaces, lack of privacy, and chaotic or disorganized surroundings.
- Help providers recognize that shock, denial, anger, grief, acceptance, and coping are common stages by which individuals come to terms with trauma; a homeless child or adult may be in any one or more of these stages when a disaster occurs. Provide information about where it is safe, as well as where it may be unsafe, to seek shelter during a disaster.

**Homeless Individuals Have High Rates of Past Trauma**

- The National Center on Family Homelessness reports that 92% of homeless American mothers have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.
- 83% of homeless children have been exposed to at least one serious act of violence by age 12.
- There were 1,148 reported hate crimes committed against homeless people between 1999 and 2010 in 47 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.; 27% of the crimes were fatal.

**When Responding to Homeless Individuals and Families during Disaster:**

- Ensure that homeless individuals and families are physically safe.
- Provide basic emotional and tangible psychological support using interventions such as Psychological First Aid (<http://learn.nctsn.org/course/category.php?id=11>).
- Make the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-SAFE) and the Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990) available to sheltered individuals with concerns (through signage, access to a phone, etc.).
- Keep families together during a disaster to help children and their parents maintain unity and comfort.
- Address a homeless individual or family's immediate and unique needs.
  - Arrange for food, shelter, and transportation.
  - Offer age-appropriate emergency and disaster information to homeless children.
  - Provide gender-informed services to women and girls by making female case managers available.
  - Make trauma-specific assessment resources available to service providers, such as tools that screen for anxiety, depression, or substance abuse (e.g. SAMHSA's Behavioral Health Screening Tools).
  - Build the capacity to connect homeless disaster survivors with experienced service providers for follow-up care after their physical and psychological wellbeing has been safeguarded.
  - Reconnect with prior service providers when available and appropriate.

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## **Disaster Response for Homeless Individuals and Families: A Trauma-Informed Approach (continued)**

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### **Key Points:**

- Safety, unity, and immediate needs are of utmost importance for homeless individuals and families during a public health emergency or disaster.
- Many homeless individuals and families have already experienced significant trauma and vulnerability; they will benefit from a trauma-informed response following emergencies and disasters.
- Knowledge of trauma-informed systems of care is a valuable tool for effectively communicating with homeless individuals and families and for connecting them with other social services.

### **Suggested Planning Resources:**

- Emergency Planning for People Experiencing Homelessness:  
<http://idavoad.org/minutes/2011-09-19-conference/IDVOAD-Emergency-Planning-Homeless-2011-9-19.pdf>
- Shelter from the Storm: Trauma-Informed Care in Homelessness Service Settings:  
<http://homelessness.samhsa.gov/ResourceFiles/cenfdthy.pdf>
- Trauma-Informed Care 101:  
<http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/Trauma-Informed-Care-101-46857.aspx>
- Ready for Anything: A Disaster Planning Manual for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs:  
[http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ready\\_for\\_anything.pdf](http://ncfy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ready_for_anything.pdf)
- Constructing a Robust and Rigorous Homeless Education Program, In Case of Disaster and Every Day:  
[http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/dis\\_hb/toolbox.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/dis_hb/toolbox.pdf)

### **Suggested Response Resources:**

- Behavioral Health Screening Tools:  
<http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/clinical-practice/screening-tools>
- Psychological First Aid for First Responders:  
<http://learn.nctsn.org/course/category.php?id=11>
- Psychological Aid for Families Experiencing Homelessness:  
[http://www.trauma-informed-california.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PFA\\_Families\\_homelessness.pdf](http://www.trauma-informed-california.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PFA_Families_homelessness.pdf)