

■ Service Delivery Sites and Settings

Service Site Challenges in Delivering Psychological First Aid

You can face many challenges in delivering services to disaster survivors and disaster relief workers. These challenges are often related to the specific disaster characteristics (for example, natural vs. human caused, size, location) and those of the individuals involved (for example, populations of special consideration—those with disabilities, youth, disadvantaged groups, individuals with pre-existing medical or mental health conditions). Other challenges pertain to the multiple settings in which you may be deployed. The following information will be helpful in anticipating and understanding the unique challenges of some disaster-related service sites.

General Population Shelters

When it is determined that a community or area of the community must be evacuated because of dangerous or threatening conditions, General Population Shelters are opened for the temporary housing of individuals. General Population Shelters are usually located in schools, community and recreation centers, or in other large facilities. Shelters usually have limited space for people to sleep, as well as an area for meals to be served. Typical challenges include establishing shelter rules (for example, lights out, regulated use of showers when in limited supply, meal times), addressing the socio-cultural and ethnic issues that arise when bringing diverse populations together, managing public health issues (for example, sanitation, medication dispensing, isolating the sick), and resolving disputes that arise among shelter residents or between shelter residents and staff.

Service Centers

Service Centers may be opened by a local or federal governmental agency or by disaster relief organizations to meet the initial needs of disaster survivors. These centers typically offer assistance with locating temporary housing or providing for the immediate personal needs of disaster survivors, such as food, clothing, and clean-up materials. Depending on the size and magnitude of the disaster, you may encounter large numbers of survivors seeking services, and anger and frustration expressed by survivors in circumstances where there are inadequate supplies.

Community Outreach Teams

Community Outreach Teams are usually established in the event of disasters that affect a large geographic area and/or a significant percentage of the population. These teams are often necessary to avoid long lines at Service Centers or when transportation services for the general population are limited. The teams are usually composed of two or more individuals that can provide comprehensive services to disaster survivors. For example, a disaster mental health or spiritual care professional may be teamed up with a representative from the American Red Cross who can provide assistance in meeting the survivors' food, clothing, and shelter needs.

Family Reception Centers

Family Reception Centers are typically opened in the immediate aftermath of a disaster involving mass casualties or fatalities. There is a common recognition that after such disasters, individuals may be trying to locate family or other loved ones specifically involved in the disaster or separated during the evacuation process. Often these are temporary holding sites until a more structured and operational Family Assistance Center can be opened. Family Reception Centers may be established in close proximity to the immediate disaster scene where individuals arrive in search of family and other loved ones involved in the incident, or in healthcare facilities where the injured have been transported.

Family Assistance Centers

Family Assistance Centers are commonly opened in the event of a disaster involving mass casualties or fatalities. These centers usually offer a range of services in an effort to meet the needs of individuals under these circumstances. Mental health services, spiritual care, and crime victims' services, as well as the services of law enforcement, the medical examiner, disaster relief agencies, and other local, state, and federal agencies are also offered on site. Family Assistance Centers are usually located away from the immediate disaster site. Family members may request visits to the affected site or memorial services. Therefore, the Family Assistance Centers should be close enough to facilitate those activities.

Points of Dispensing (POD) Centers

PODs might be established by local, state, or federal public health agencies in the event of a public health emergency. These centers may be established to provide mass distribution of medications or vaccinations in an effort to prevent or mitigate the spread of any communicable disease or other public health risk. Healthcare facilities may open PODs with the goal of vaccinating or distributing necessary medications to their own personnel or to reduce the burden on the community POD sites.

Phone Banks and Hotlines

Communities and healthcare systems may wish to set up a Phone Bank to address and respond to numerous calls with questions that typically arise after a disaster. These Phone Banks are likely to be overwhelmed in the first few hours or days, with many questions regarding such issues as locating missing or injured family members or healthcare concerns. Community hotlines may encounter similar questions and address additional information such as the availability of shelter locations, mass food distribution sites, and other disaster relief services.

Emergency First Aid Stations

Emergency First Aid Stations provide basic medical services to disaster survivors as well as responders who may suffer minor injuries in the rescue and recovery efforts. They are usually located in close proximity to the direct impact of a disaster. In the event of a disaster resulting in mass casualties, makeshift emergency first aid stations may be set up near a healthcare facility in an effort to relieve the burden on emergency room services and ensure that such high level care is available to the seriously injured.

Hospitals and Hospital Emergency Room Settings

During a mass casualty event, survivors who are triaged on site and listed as “immediate” will be brought to a hospital. In addition, many others will self-transport to the hospital wanting to be seen in the Emergency Room. This is likely to create a surge on medical resource capacity. Survivors may arrive in large numbers, many with both psychological and physical reactions.

One important goal is to facilitate the treatment of injured survivors by removing individuals who do not require immediate medical care from the patient flow. However, increased physical symptoms have frequently been reported after disasters, particularly among those who witness injury and death, and those who may have had toxic exposure to a chemical or biological attack. As a result, differential diagnosis may at times be difficult, since signs and symptoms may be nonspecific and/or status may change over time. News or rumors of such an attack may generate an influx of those who fear they have been exposed, and rapidly overwhelm the system. Along with a system of triage, hospitals may set up a “support center” where Psychological First Aid providers can refer those in need to a spectrum of medical, psychological, behavioral, and pharmacological interventions.

Respite Centers

Respite Centers are locations where first responders can rest and obtain food, clothing, and other basic support services. They are usually opened where prolonged rescue and recovery efforts are necessary. Respite Centers are usually located in close proximity to the direct impact of a disaster. Typical challenges for Psychological First Aid include limited time to interact with responders who are extremely busy and tired, and feel a sense of urgency to continue working.