



Hurricane Harvey Psychological Support Project

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Organizational Resilience International (www.oriconsulting.com)

Project title: Hurricane Harvey Psychological Support

Project location: Texas, USA



Outskirts of Houston after Hurricane Harvey, Photo by SC National Guard

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Background

Category 4 Hurricane Harvey hit the coast of Texas on Friday, August 25, 2017. By Wednesday, some areas had received over 47 inches of rain and flooding, and by Thursday, August 31, 2017, the storm had killed at least 44 people and damaged or destroyed 48,700 homes. 350,000 people, many uninsured, have registered for disaster assistance.

For many survivors, the fear, trauma, and loss experienced during Hurricane Harvey will result in emotional scars that may last for years to come. Long after the water has receded and homes have been rebuilt, the stress and anxiety that accompany disasters of this size and scope will remain. Research indicates that suicide rates, substance abuse, and violence frequently increase in the aftermath of community-wide disasters. Putting life back together in the form of a “new normal” is an emotionally overwhelming process. Our project focuses on communities in the affected areas to help minimize the “disaster after the disaster” and get community members back on their feet.

RMF's Presence

Real Medicine Foundation is an international NGO with an excellent track record in psychological trauma support. We believe that “real medicine” focuses on treating the person as a whole, providing medical/physical, emotional, social, and economic support. To care for victims of Hurricane Harvey, we are collaborating with Organizational Resilience International (a partner since Hurricane Katrina) to implement a 3-phase psychological support project for Hurricane Harvey victims in the Houston area.

Since December 2017, our team has been speaking with clergy members from across the Greater Houston area to identify and assess their needs regarding how to support both church and community members in the wake of the September disaster. From January to February 2018, we provided over 70 clergy members and lay leaders with training designed to assist in understanding the impact of traumatic events and to promote the identification of strategies for self-care among caregivers.

Situation Update

As we begin another new year, communities are still struggling to recover from Hurricane Harvey. In October 2018, The Texas Tribune and other local news sources reported that according to the Houston Housing and Community Development Department, about 130,000 hurricane-affected Houston residents were overlooked in the city's original housing needs assessment. Aid has been slow to reach many, but on January 15, 2019, the Houston mayor's office announced the start of a Homeowner Assistance Program and opening of four Housing Resource Centers spread throughout the city, thanks to \$1.17 billion in federal aid to assist community members whose homes were damaged by Hurricane Harvey. The mayor's office explained further that the funds would come through the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the State of Texas General Land Office, and that low- and moderate-income homeowners would be given priority.

While communities are still recovering from the physical effects of Hurricane Harvey, the psychological effects of the disaster are often overlooked. Whether families stay in their damaged homes or relocate, feelings of anxiety, depression, or disorientation often persist. Last year, Real Medicine Foundation provided over 70 Houston-area clergy members and lay leaders with training to better understand the impact of traumatic events and identify strategies for self-care, further equipping them to navigate, and help community members navigate, the psychological strain of long-term disaster recovery. Sufficient funding has not been reached to hold additional counseling and training sessions. However, these clergy members and lay leaders will continue to pass their learning on to their congregations and communities through sermons, individual pastoral counseling, and ministry, thereby broadening the program's overall impact to thousands of people.