



# Costal storms:

Disaster Mental Health  
Planning, Preparedness  
and Response in NYC

208, January 30

---

Monika Erős-Sarnyai, MD. MA  
[msarnyai@health.nyc.gov](mailto:msarnyai@health.nyc.gov)



# Disasters and Emergencies: The Mental Health Response

DOHMH:

Office of  
Community  
Resilience

(form. OMHDPR: Office of Mental  
Health Disaster Preparedness and  
Response)

**Help the City to cope with and  
recover from the psychological  
impact of disasters and public  
health emergencies**

# Addressing Disaster Mental Health Needs in NYC

- I. Planning and preparedness
- II. Acute phase response
- III. Intermediate and long-term response

# I. Planning and Preparedness

## Goal:

- **Get ready, coordinate and collaborate for action**
- **Strengthening community resilience**
- **Building response capacity**

## Main activities:

- Developing and updating disaster mental health plans, guides and tools
- Increasing response capacity through staff, responder and provider trainings and drills
- Supporting NYC community resilience through training, psycho-education and coalition building

# II. Acute Phase Response

- Needs assessment
- Response coordination
- Direct mental health support (**R.E.S.T.**)



# REST:

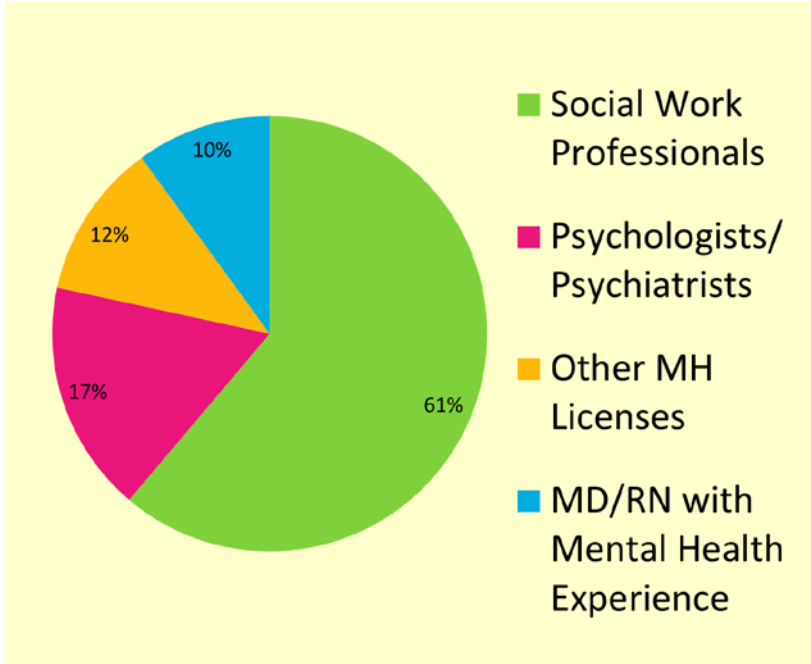
Resilience  
and  
Emotional  
Support  
Team

**A core group of  
qualified, trained mental  
health professionals  
who, when activated,  
can be rapidly mobilized  
and deployed.**

**Created in 2009**

# REST

## Who we are



**REST on-site support  
463 (30 DOHMH) & counting**

85 REST responders have been trained additionally in providing services via telephone



# REST

**Our role  
&  
Our goal**

**Provide acute phase mental health support to individuals affected by disasters and other public health emergencies**



**Mitigate the events' negative impact on health and functioning**





# REST

## The services we provide



- **Psychoeducation**
- **PFA: Help normalize emotions**
- **Crisis counseling: Review options and help problem solve**
- **Refer and/or link with support and services**
- **Link with crisis services**



# REST

**Response sites-  
Where we work**

- Evacuation shelters
  - Points of Dispensing (POD)
  - Disaster assistance sites
  - Disaster anniversaries
  - Other (response) sites and events
- 
- DOHMH Emotional Call Center

# The Call Center



**Provide over the phone  
emotional support.**

- **Staffed by trained REST team members**



# REST

## Events we responded to

### 2009

- H1N1 Influenza Outbreak
- US Airway flight 1549
- Chinatown van accident
- Construction crane collapse

### 2010

- Mass Causality Incident/FAC Drill
- Haiti Earthquake Resource Center

### 2011

- Hurricane Irene
- Casino Highway Bus Accident

### 2012

- Hurricane (Superstorm) Sandy

### 2014

- Ebola

### 2015/2016 (ongoing)

- Missing Persons Day, 9/11 anniversaries

### 2017/2018

- Hurricane Maria- field deployment

# Another Important Task



## Support data collection

- Collect data via encounter logs

### Purpose:

- Help leadership to make informed decisions about resource distribution
- Helps generate reports for lessons learned

# III. Intermediate & Long-term Response

## Goal:

- Improve long term mental health outcome

## Main activities:

- Support population based outreach for screening and referrals
- Support connecting with mental health providers for longer term care
- Support the provision of short term population based MH support services (Crisis Counseling Program)
- Support mental health and well-being to increase resilience

# Hurricane Sandy



Responding to  
Psychological  
Needs in  
Hurricane  
Shelters

# The Role of OMHDPR

---

## Coordinating the mental health response

- **Activate and deploy mental health responders**
- **Provide onsite disaster mental health services**
- **Develop/distribute disaster mental health information material**
- **Provide remote support via 24 hour DOHMH operated hotline**



**2012**

**October 27**

-

**November 17**

- Deployed 680 mental health support staff (over 400 REST + MRC)
- Operated 24 hours MH support line



**Provided mental health support to those evacuated and staying in 21 city shelters (8 special needs and 13 evacuation)**

# Lessons Learned



- Increase response capacity and readiness
- Increase awareness about services
- Improve data collection

- Increase response capacity and readiness

- Train responders
- Provide refresher trainings and drills
- Train needs assessment
- Provide information about resource

- Improve data collection

- **Develop encounter form that allow for more standardized data collection**
- **Include recording encounters to responder training curricula**
- **Send responders the encounter form when they are activated**

- Increase awareness about available services

Coordinate with OEM to make forms and materials readily available for staff and for the public



### OEM Shelter Kit

- Situation/Needs Assessment Form
- Mental Health Encounter Form
- Call Center Flyer
- Coping Poster

# Needs Assessment: Shelter Form

## DOHMH SHELTER MENTAL HEALTH SITUATION AND SERVICE ASSESSMENT FORM

To be completed by mental health staff deployed by DOHMH.  
Complete and transfer the form to DOHMH as instructed.

Date:	Facility type (please circle): Hurricane Shelter / Evacuation / SMNS
Time:	Facility Name:
Name (completed by):	

### Section I: MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

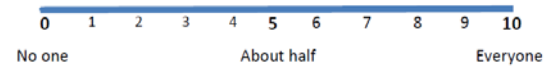
Answer the questions below to help us assess the current mental health service situation in the shelter. Consult with shelter management staff to obtain the most up to date information about available services. If this is not possible, make the assessment based on your own observations.

- Are there mental health staff currently in the shelter providing PFA and crisis counseling?  
 Yes  No  Unknown  
If yes, how many (approximately)? \_\_\_\_\_  
If yes, who deployed them (circle) DOHMH MRC Red Cross Other agency \_\_\_\_\_
- Are there medical professionals (e.g. doctors and nurses) currently working in the shelter?  
 Yes  No  Unknown
- Are there shelter staff currently providing spiritual support (e.g. rabbi, father, minister, imam etc.) in the shelter?  
 Yes  No  Unknown  
If yes, who deployed them \_\_\_\_\_
- Are printed mental health information materials (e.g. tip sheets, brochures) available and displayed?  
 Yes  No  Unknown
- Are printed mental health information and support materials available in the language(s) required?  
 Yes  No  Unknown  
If no, please specify the language(s) needed \_\_\_\_\_
- Are translators/interpreters available for the languages needed?  
 Yes  No  Unknown  
If no, please specify the language(s) needed \_\_\_\_\_
- Is information about DOHMH call centers for telephone crisis counseling available?  
 Yes  No  Unknown
- Are telephones available in private areas for the public to contact the call center?  
 Yes  No  Unknown

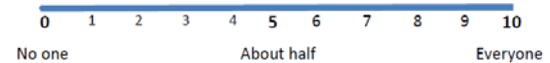
### Section II: PSYCHOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Walk around the shelter and observe the current psychological state of evacuees and staff. Form an overall impression and on the scales below indicate what is your perception from zero to ten of the level of:

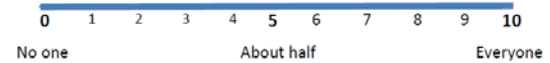
- Distress: people crying, sobbing, shaking or behaving agitatedly



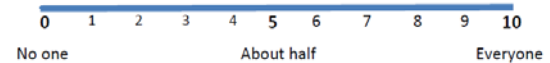
- Argumentativeness: people arguing to the point that it disturbs others



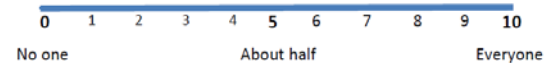
- Anger and frustration: people using tone and language that indicates excessive frustration and anger



- Disruptiveness: people refusing to follow shelter rules and instructions



- Passivity: people not participating in basic daily activities such as eating



## Feeling Overwhelmed? Coping With Stress after a Disaster

After a disaster experiencing distress and strong emotional reactions such as fear, sadness, anxiety, anger, and helplessness are common. These are normal reactions. Understanding these reactions can help you cope.

### Ways to cope:

- Understand that it takes time to cope, adapt & heal.
- Focus on your strengths and abilities.
- Ask for help.
- Accept help from friends and the community.

**Need help?**  
For emotional support call the  
Disaster Mental Health Support Call Center at:

**(347)396-7952**  
**Free. Confidential. 24/7.**



## New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Disaster Mental Health Call Center

The DOHMH Disaster Mental Health Call Center provides emotional support to individuals affected by local disasters or public health emergencies. If you are feeling overwhelmed or just need to speak with someone about your feelings or reactions to the event, Call Center operators are here to assist you. Just call the number listed below and you will be promptly connected to a caring mental health professional. All calls are confidential.

Stress, anxiety and depression are common reactions to a disaster or public health emergency. If you feel overwhelmed or are experiencing any of the following, please call 1 (347) 396-7952.

- Crying, sobbing, shaking, or feeling agitated
- Feeling angry, edgy or lashing out at others including loved ones
- Feeling tired all of the time and sleeping too much or too little
- Eating too much or too little
- Drinking alcohol or using tobacco or illegal drugs to cope with the situation
- Feeling sad, hopeless and entirely isolated from others

### Disaster Mental Health Support Call Center



**1 (347)396-7952**

*This number will only be operational during a response to a local disaster or public health emergency.*

The Call Center is staffed by trained mental health professionals from the DOHMH Resilience and Emotional Support Team (REST). The REST team offers:

- ✓ Emotional support to those who are in distress related to any local disaster or public health emergency
- ✓ Information on how to recognize distress and tips on healthy coping
- ✓ Referral information for longer term support

*This service is for individuals at designated NYC/OEM response sites.*



# Tip sheet for response site staff

## Coping with Stress: Tips for Shelter Staff

The environment of a shelter is stressful. While working in a shelter and helping others can be personally rewarding, the stress caused by long hours and exposure to human suffering can have a negative effect on even the most experienced staff. Stress can negatively affect how people feel, think and act, and when stressed, people make mistakes and function less effectively.

*Follow these simple steps to minimize the negative effects of stress on your health and functioning and cope better with the demands of the situation:*

### BE AWARE OF NORMAL STRESS REACTIONS

Experiencing stress during a disaster or other traumatic event, for a brief period of time is normal. There is no right or wrong way to react. People's reactions vary. These are some of the most common normal reactions:

#### Body

Feeling exhausted, headaches, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, chills and sweating, having trouble with sleeping and eating. Stress can also worsen existing medical conditions.

#### Emotions

Strong emotions including emotional outbursts, shock, fear, anxiety, anger and irritability. Feeling helpless, hopeless and sad.

#### Thoughts

Difficulties concentrating, remembering and making decisions.

#### Behavioral Reactions

Not acting "like yourself", being restless and argumentative, hyperactive or withdrawn, having conflicts at home and at work, smoking, drug or alcohol use and abuse.

#### Spiritual Reactions

Questioning basic values, withdrawal from or sudden turn towards spiritual support.



## MANAGE STRESS!

*Be aware of normal stress reactions.*

*Be alert to the signs of burnout.*

*Practice good self-care.*

*Know when and where to seek help.*



## BE ALERT TO THE SIGNS OF BURNOUT

*Burnout comes from a combination of being overworked and overstressed. It makes you feel exhausted and indifferent about your work.*

Responders often refuse to take breaks and insist on staying until the work is done. Frequently they ignore their own needs while helping others. As a result, they are more prone to burnout. When you ignore feelings of stress over an extended period of time your work can suffer, and you may develop burnout. Signs indicating that you may need extra time to rest and recover:

- Feeling mentally and physically exhausted
- Feeling lethargic and depressed
- Being uncharacteristically late
- Being dissatisfied with work

## PRACTICE GOOD SELF-CARE

Maintaining a healthy body and mind will help you cope with a stressful environment, work effectively and prevent burnout. The following are tips that can help you take good care of yourself all times.

### Taking Care of Your Body

Get enough sleep. Eat regular, healthy meals, and remain physically active. Avoid drinking alcohol excessively or using drugs or tobacco to help you cope.

### Taking Care of Your Emotional Health

Do things that help you feel in control of your life. Focus on your strengths and previous accomplishments. Try to remain positive and be patient with yourself. Make time to reflect, meditate, or pray. Save time for the activities you enjoy.

### Reach Out

Express your feelings and talk about your experiences. You may find this comforting and feel more connected. Ask and accept help if you feel overwhelmed or discouraged.

### Reduce Your Stress

Try to stick to your daily routine as much as possible. Do things you find comforting. Keep yourself informed, but do not watch or listen to too much media coverage of the event. It can be upsetting to you and to those others around you, including your children.

### Manage Your Workload

Maintain a healthy balance between work and rest. Take frequent breaks and give your body and mind enough time to rest and recharge. Make time for your family and friends, and for your hobbies.

## KNOW WHEN AND WHERE TO SEEK HELP

*Feeling overwhelmed?  
Concerned about someone else?*

*To find help call LifeNet: Free. Confidential. 24/7*

1-800-543-3638 (English)

1-877-298-3373 (Spanish)

1-877-990-8585 (Chinese)

1-212-982-5284 (TTY)

*Seek help if your stress reactions worsen, persist, or interfere with your daily functioning.*





# Tip sheet for the public

## Tips on Coping with Disasters and Other Stressful and Traumatic Events

Experiencing traumatic events such as emergencies and disasters can be stressful, even overwhelming. The stress caused by these events can have a negative effect on how you feel, think and act.

*The following tips will help you to reduce stress and cope better.*

### KNOW HOW TO RECOGNIZE NORMAL STRESS REACTIONS

Most people exposed to stressful and traumatic events will show some signs of distress – but there is no right or wrong way to react. Everyone experiences stress in their own way. The following are examples of normal reactions to stressful and traumatic events:

#### Physical Reactions

Exhaustion, headaches, dizziness, chills and sweating chest pains, breathing difficulties, rapid heartbeat, sweating and gastrointestinal problems. Stress can also worsen existing medical conditions.

#### Emotional Reactions

Disbelief, shock, fear, anxiety, anger, agitation, irritability, helplessness, loss of interest in activities, guilt and self-doubt, sadness, and grief, loneliness and isolation. Some people may experience depression.

#### Behavioral Reactions

Not acting "like yourself"; restlessness and argumentativeness; hyperactivity or withdrawal; changes in eating and sleeping habits; crying; emotional outbursts; conflicts at home and at work; smoking; drugs, or alcohol use and abuse.

#### Cognitive Reactions

Confusion, forgetfulness, difficulties concentrating and making decisions, nightmares and flash backs.

#### Spiritual Reactions

Questioning basic beliefs and values, withdrawal from or sudden turn towards spiritual support.



*After experiencing a stressful or traumatic event:*

*Be patient with yourself and those around you.*

*Give everyone time to cope, adapt and heal.*

*The information in this sheet will help you understand what you can do to reduce stress and be better prepared to cope with traumatic events.*

*Seek help if signs of stress worsen, persist, or interfere with daily functioning.*

### KNOW THE SIGNS THAT INDICATE YOU MIGHT NEED HELP

Most reactions to stress are transient, and most people will recover with time and support. Stress reactions can appear immediately after the event or may not appear for weeks or even months; memories of previous traumatic experiences may also re-surface. Those directly affected are more likely to have stronger reactions. If the symptoms persist, or if they worsen or interfere with daily functioning, you should consider seeking professional help. If left untreated, these symptoms can affect your health and quality of life for many years.

### KNOW WHERE YOU CAN FIND HELP

If you feel overwhelmed or are concerned about yourself or someone else, you can find help by calling 1-800 LIFENET, a free, confidential helpline for New York City residents, available 24/7, with trained staff ready to take your calls.

### KNOW HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

#### Take Care OF Your Body

- ☛ Get enough sleep.
- ☛ Eat regular, healthy meals and remain physically active.
- ☛ Avoid drinking alcohol excessively or using drugs or tobacco to help you cope.

#### Take Care of Your Emotional Health

- ☛ Do things that help you recharge and feel in control of your life.
- ☛ Set realistic goals for the future.
- ☛ Focus on your strengths and previous accomplishments.
- ☛ Try to remain positive and be patient with yourself.
- ☛ Make time to reflect, meditate or pray.
- ☛ Save time for the activities you enjoy.

#### Reach Out

- ☛ Do not be afraid to express your feelings or to talk about your experiences. You may find that others are experiencing similar things, and you can understand and support each other.
- ☛ Do not hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed or discouraged.
- ☛ Stay connected to friends and family.
- ☛ Accept support - people do care!

#### Reduce Your Stress

- ☛ Try to stick to your daily routine as much as possible. This will give you life structure.
- ☛ Do things you find comforting such as reading, listening to music, exercising.
- ☛ During a disaster, keep yourself informed by obtaining information from reliable resources, but do not become preoccupied with the news. Watching too much media coverage of the event can be upsetting to you and those others around you, including your children. Do not listen to or act upon rumors.

#### Manage Your Workload

- ☛ Maintain a healthy balance between work and rest.
- ☛ Take frequent breaks and give your body and mind enough time to rest and recharge.
- ☛ As you try to cope, do not let work take over your life.
- ☛ Remember to make time for your family and friends, as well as your own hobbies and interests.

*If you or anyone you know feels overwhelmed – reach out.*

*Help is available!*

1-800-LifeNet  
1-800-543-3638  
(English)

1-877-Ayudese  
1-877-298-3373  
(Spanish)

1-877-990-8585  
(Chinese)

1-212-982-5284  
(TTY)

**NYC**  
Health

# Encounter form: A recording of actions

## NYC DOHMH Shelter Mental Health Encounter Form (to be completed by DOHMH deployed psychological support staff)

Name (Please print):	Date:	Shelter Name:
Phone number or e-mail:	Time:	Location - Borough (please circle): M QN BK BX SI
REST Responder: YES NO	Shift:	

*Record your observations and the support you provided at the shelter by completing the tables below. Each table has three sections (I-III).*

*Complete a separate table for each individual of family/group you assisted. You can check more than one box.*

I. Demographics: complete either the "Individual" or the "Family/Group" section, depending on who you assisted. <i>Check all that apply.</i>																							
<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>				<b>FAMILY/GROUP</b>																			
<input type="checkbox"/> Public  <input type="checkbox"/> Staff  <b>Gender:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Male  <input type="checkbox"/> Female	<b>Race/Ethnicity:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<b>Age (years):</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Child ___ <input type="checkbox"/> Teen ___ <input type="checkbox"/> Adult ___ <input type="checkbox"/> Seniors ___	<b>Language:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Family <input type="checkbox"/> Group  <b>Gender (how many):</b>  Males: ___ Females: ___	<b>Race/Ethnicity:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Other / Multiple	<b>Age (how many):</b>  Children: ___ Teen(s): ___ Adult(s): ___ Seniors: ___	<b>Language(s):</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> English <input type="checkbox"/> Spanish <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> Other																
II. Distress Information: Level and cause <i>Check all that apply.</i>																							
<b>Level of distress:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High	<b>Cause(s) of distress:</b> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing the event</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Medication need</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Family related</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Worries about unattended possession</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Medical condition</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping difficulties</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Event related homelessness</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Personal comfort (e.g. clothing, food)</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Mental health condition</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Fear for personal safety</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness (before the event)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Wants transfer to another shelter</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Substance use</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Child related</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Lost possessions (e.g. car, personal belongings)</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Other</td> </tr> </table>							<input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing the event	<input type="checkbox"/> Medication need	<input type="checkbox"/> Family related	<input type="checkbox"/> Worries about unattended possession	<input type="checkbox"/> Medical condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/> Event related homelessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Personal comfort (e.g. clothing, food)	<input type="checkbox"/> Mental health condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Fear for personal safety	<input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness (before the event)	<input type="checkbox"/> Wants transfer to another shelter	<input type="checkbox"/> Substance use	<input type="checkbox"/> Child related	<input type="checkbox"/> Lost possessions (e.g. car, personal belongings)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Experiencing the event	<input type="checkbox"/> Medication need	<input type="checkbox"/> Family related	<input type="checkbox"/> Worries about unattended possession																				
<input type="checkbox"/> Medical condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping difficulties	<input type="checkbox"/> Event related homelessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Personal comfort (e.g. clothing, food)																				
<input type="checkbox"/> Mental health condition	<input type="checkbox"/> Fear for personal safety	<input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness (before the event)	<input type="checkbox"/> Wants transfer to another shelter																				
<input type="checkbox"/> Substance use	<input type="checkbox"/> Child related	<input type="checkbox"/> Lost possessions (e.g. car, personal belongings)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other																				
III. Services Provided (Mental Health Support) <i>Check all that apply.</i>																							
<b>PFA / Crisis Counseling:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> < 20 min  <input type="checkbox"/> > 20 min	<b>Gave information for obtaining:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual support <input type="checkbox"/> Medical help (in the shelter) <input type="checkbox"/> Disaster Mental Health Support Call Center support <input type="checkbox"/> Lifenet: mental health referral <input type="checkbox"/> Children's support services <input type="checkbox"/> Safety related support (in the shelter) <input type="checkbox"/> Housing related services <input type="checkbox"/> Other (e.g. personal needs, financial )	<b>Made appointment or assisted the person(s) with obtaining needed service(s):</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Spiritual support <input type="checkbox"/> Medical help (in the shelter) <input type="checkbox"/> Disaster Mental Health Support Call Center support <input type="checkbox"/> Lifenet: mental health referral service <input type="checkbox"/> Children's support services <input type="checkbox"/> Safety related support (in the shelter) <input type="checkbox"/> Housing related services <input type="checkbox"/> Other (e.g. personal needs, financial )	<b>Gave out psycho-education and information material:</b>  <input type="checkbox"/> Stress management tip sheets (printed material) <input type="checkbox"/> Disaster Mental Health Support Call Center contact information <input type="checkbox"/> Lifenet card <input type="checkbox"/> Other																				

# Thank you!

[msarnyai@health.nyc.gov](mailto:msarnyai@health.nyc.gov)