

Climate Change and Disaster Behavioral Health

Disaster Behavioral Health Planning Tool

As disaster behavioral health planners focus on preparing for new, more frequent, and more intense climate change-related disasters, SAMHSA DTAC has compiled information and created tools and resources on planning and community engagement to help inform climate change from a disaster behavioral health perspective. The way we communicate about climate change, plan, train/exercise disaster scenarios, and promote positive, actionable behaviors and steps to address the issue are all addressed.

Assessing Emerging Threats and Preparedness Planning Considerations

- Plan and train for unprecedented levels of disaster impact (e.g., flood levels, drought), and don't rely solely on past events and old data for future projections and planning.
- Consider which partner agencies should be invited to the planning table, such as emergency management, hospitals, mental health centers, health departments, human services providers, faith-based organizations, the media, and cultural and ethnic groups.
- Consider how to best prioritize addressing threats by way of surveying partners and participating in, or obtaining the results from, hazard vulnerability assessments and/or joint risk assessments in your region.
- Consider whether any adaption to current training should occur or if new training should be developed to address the mental health and substance misuse impacts of extreme weather events. What is your training plan to provide this training to the populations that most need to receive it?
- Look for early warning signs and trends from behavioral health systems of care and behavioral health systems integrated with primary care.
- Engage partners to meet future demand for cooling centers and/or shelters, considering new collaborations with organizations and institutions.
- Develop disaster behavioral health tools and resources around extreme weather events to promote healthy behaviors and help reduce stigma surrounding mental health.

- Consider your mental health and substance misuse providers' capacity to meet the demands in a climate change-related disaster response and recovery. What gaps might exist and how can those gaps be addressed?
- Consider emphasizing the importance of personal/family disaster preparedness as future disasters could increase in both scale and frequency. Political divisiveness on climate change, and an expectation for quick government intervention, could impact public perception and deter personal/family preparedness.
- Low-income, minority, and historically underserved populations are disproportionately affected by extreme weather events. Consider how these populations will be served and how they can be represented in the preparedness planning phase.
- People living alone may be more at risk than people living in a group setting.
- Increased use of alcohol during extreme heat events can increase the risk of dehydration and impair judgement.
- Extreme weather events may disrupt transportation and access to mental health and substance misuse services in the community. What plans are in place to address these challenges?
- Urban areas are often warmer during the day and cool off less at night than surrounding rural areas. This is known as the Urban Heat Island. Consider location in preparedness planning.

Communication and Community Engagement Considerations

- Consider whether an emphasis on inches of rain or a warming of several degrees will impact your audience as much as an emphasis on the impact those changes could have (data vs. stories).
- Consider whether using “climate change,” “extreme weather events,” or hazard-specific language will have the greatest impact upon the intended population. Disaster-specific language may be most impactful as it avoids the politics surrounding climate change, removes the barrier of psychological distance, and focuses on the disaster-related impact people will see or feel.
- Who is your intended audience? Is it the general public or are you targeting those disproportionately impacted by climate change?

- Let people know that they are not alone. There is a high percentage of people that are concerned about climate change.
- Let people know what they can do. Most people want to do something, so empower that action. Policy change is important, but don't bypass the empowerment of community members' involvement in the change as well.
- Timing matters. For example, consider a call to action during the warmest summer months, in anticipation of weather-related events, or following a disaster event.
- When promoting new habits, make them easy, make the new behavior appealing, and have the new habit disrupt an old behavior.
- Consider utilizing social media preparedness resources, such as the toolkits available at Ready.gov (<https://www.ready.gov/toolkits>).
- Consider drafting communications ahead of time so that they are ready before a disaster strikes.
- Using the [Five Essential Elements of Immediate and Mid-Term Mass Trauma Intervention: Empirical Evidence](#) article as a guide, consider how you can promote a sense of safety, calming, self- and community efficacy, connectedness, and hope.

Lead By Example

Consider how your actions and priorities signal to others your commitment to addressing climate change and extreme weather events.

- What kind of government vehicles are in your fleet, and are any of them environmentally friendly?
- When is an in-person meeting necessary, and when could travel by car or airplane be avoided?
- Are you discussing climate change with preparedness planning partners?
- Do you bring to attention the mental health and substance misuse implications of a climate change-related disaster when conducting or participating in training/exercises?

Disaster Recovery Checklist

Consider the following in climate-change related disaster recovery:

- Activate staff and/or volunteers to support a response.
- Activate pre-established partnerships.
- If needed, provide Just in Time training to staff and/or volunteers.
- Activate and/or support the utilization of and staffing for cooling centers or shelters.
- Monitor existing behavioral health systems for increased utilization and overwhelm.
- Ensure that your team has the depth and training to support a long-lasting recovery.
- Ensure that your communication products are informed by best practices in community engagement with consideration of the populations most at risk.
- Communicate the mental health and substance misuse risks related to the disaster event to response partners and the community to normalize these reactions.
- Identify whether any additional resources such as grant programs (e.g., the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program) are available to support an extended recovery.
- To ensure the mental health and well-being of your team and the greater response workforce, consider having plans, tools, and resources available to provide this type of support to responders.
- Model and promote self-care and staff-care.
- Capture lessons learned for future responses and response planning.
- Participate in after action reviews and improvement planning processes. Ensure that there is representation of those disproportionately impacted by climate change.
- Make updates to your plans based on lessons learned.