

## Disaster Services: Making a Difference

By Eric Klingensmith, Psy.D., P.E.M.



Commission for Counseling  
and Psychological Services

A Division of the American College Personnel Association



My name is Eric Klingensmith and I am a doctoral level counselor at Grand Valley State University's [Counseling Center](#), and the Crisis Coordinator in a joint position with the Counseling Center and Residence Life Office. When not at [GVSU](#), I am actively involved with several volunteer crisis and disaster response organizations including the [American Red Cross](#) and the [Michigan-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team](#) (DMAT). In my roles with these organizations I train, practice, and learn how to provide disaster assistance and disaster mental health services and management. I would like to share with you my experiences with the Red Cross response to Hurricane Katrina in September, and also offer suggestions for those who may wish to provide disaster aid in the future.

I deployed to Mobile, AL on Sept 8, where I began a 10 day tour of duty with the American Red Cross's National Disaster Relief Response to Hurricane Katrina. I found myself on a plane with several other relief workers including a social worker and counselor who were on their first disaster relief operation and their first day involved with the Red Cross. Once in Mobile, I was assigned to a shelter in Citronelle, AL where I replaced an outgoing mental health staff member. The staff consisted of two shelter workers and two nurses. There were about 50 families at the shelter from a wide range of cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, disabilities, and psychological stability.

The next 10 days at this shelter reinforced the Red Cross Disaster Worker philosophy of flexibility. My four years of training with the Red Cross prepared me for this difficult assignment and the variety of tasks I would become involved in. by the time I was demobilized I had served in not only my role as mental health worker but as shelter manager, mediator, chef, child care worker, case manager, housekeeper, internet trainer, shower monitor, and advocate.

One of the most challenging aspects of my experience was learning to work with such a wide range of diversity and cultural issues in an artificial, closed, and emotionally charged environment. I soon became aware of many of the unique differences and conflicts that can arise between cultures and sub-cultures of those who are displaced. The experience was an intense introduction to working with diverse populations and the need to recognize and support personal dignity.

Many people may ask, "How can I help?" The easiest answer is to get involved with an organization like the Red Cross or other professional disaster relief agency. The last thing one should do is "self-deploy" to any type of a crisis or disaster, whether it is local or national. When someone takes it upon themselves to just show up to help, they are often more hindrance than help.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita necessitated waiving many training and prep classes for volunteers to enable them to be on-scene as quickly as possible. However, training and involvement before a disaster in an organization such as the Red Cross is one way to avoid the pitfalls and struggles of lack of experience. Volunteers in the mental health professions should be preparing themselves now to aid in future disasters.

For those of you who may have also responded, I encourage you to remain committed to your desire to help. If you haven't already done so, walk into your local Red Cross and stay connected. Keep in mind that your talents and skills can be used locally in the everyday "disasters" that the Red Cross responds to, including house and apartment fires, severe weather, or community disaster drills. All of these are valuable experiences to skills and knowledge for the next large disaster.

If you are interested in providing disaster mental health services and aid an important step is to be personally prepared. This might include creating your own personal and family plan and kit and to helping your own office and counseling center to be ready for a disaster. For those who one day may be deployed on a national disaster bring yourself prepared to be flexible, patient, and prepared to work in difficult situations, stressful environments, and possibly dealing overwhelming issues. Also, work ahead of time with your University and Department to

determine the extent you can help with a national disaster; it is better to have this discussion early to determine future support and process to allow you to go out on an assignment.

Feel free to contact me via [email](#) for more information on how to get involved with the American Red Cross or other disaster relief organizations that are looking to use our professional skills.

