



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

Understanding the Effects of Trauma and Traumatic Events to Help Prevent, Mitigate and Foster Recovery for Individuals, Organizations and Communities
A Program of Uniformed Services University, Our Nation's Federal Medical School, Bethesda, Maryland • www.usuhs.mil/csts/

NATURAL DISASTERS: Optimizing Officer and Team Performance

Natural disasters are experienced as chaotic and filled with uncertainty. In preparing for and responding to natural disasters, law enforcement officers work with numerous other first responders and community components to ensure safety, health and the continuity of community function. In addition to routine law enforcement, officers may be called on to assist with search and rescue, body recovery, and the distribution of essential supplies to survivors. Leaders of first responder organizations face unique challenges including high operational tempo, long hours, and diminished resources. Response and coordination is even more complex when units or teams are dispatched from outside local, state or federal agencies to assist in recovery operations. Usually, large scale disasters required the integration of local, state, federal and National Guard response teams.

The following tips may help managers and supervisors manage and limit disaster-response stress for their officers.

- Conflict over jurisdiction can hinder recovery efforts. It is important for law enforcement officers to be aware of the specific mission and identified chain of command for each agency.
- Maintaining the health of responders is critical. Attention to health basics such as using only potable water, providing sanitation, using protective equipment or clothing, and ensuring that adequate food, rest and proper shelter are available reduces the risk of disease and performance breakdown among officers.
- Remind officers that maintaining the peace and providing security can experienced by some as impinging on personal rights. In such cases, those

**Natural disasters
are experienced as
chaotic and filled with
uncertainty.**

in need may not respond positively to offers of assistance. Awareness of this prior to the beginning of work encourages calm reassurance in responders who may be otherwise demoralized by lack of community support for their efforts.

- Large scale evacuation orders create strain between officers and those they serve. Citizens are reluctant to leave their homes, belongings, livestock and pets, even when their own lives and health are at risk. Officers should be aware of whether an ordered evacuation is mandatory or voluntary and what level of force is authorized to use in the event of a mandatory evacuation.
- Proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise are critical to sustaining the efforts of first responders. Leaders must maintain awareness of physical limitations, sleep-rest cycle needs and potential for injury among officers and serve as role models by demonstrating appropriate self-care.
- Maintain open channels of communication between leaders and subordinates during the disaster response (both up and down the chain of command). Alterations in mission, responsibilities and task requirements are inherent as the recovery effort evolves. Take the time to “walk around and talk with” your officers. A proactive approach is more effective than maintaining a routine “open door policy”. Do not forget to listen as new information is made available to you, and remember that those working for you are trying to help you do your job.