

## **Families Helping Families**

What can family organizations in and around disaster areas do to assist and support other families of children with mental, behavioral, or emotional issues? Below are some simple suggestions to begin an effort to bring relief to families (and yourselves).

### **Those in the immediate disaster area:**

- Make contact and verify the safety of family leaders
- Establish a way to keep in consistent and predictable contact
- Identify other leaders within those communities who represent the cultures of the population
- Support all leaders through encouragement and mentoring
- Build their capacity to meet the needs of themselves and those around them with resources, such as food, clothing, gas, and money
- Use their guidance on what they need and how to best get it to them
- There is a limitation on what you can do initially as roads are closed, communication is poor, and typical avenues of assistance may be overwhelmed and of no help (Red Cross, FEMA, Salvation Army, etc)
- Call the emergency operations centers and let them know who you are and that you can assist families of children with mental health problems
- Realize that there is just not much you can do at this time, it is a time of survival and often that is all anyone has room for; emotionally and physically
- *Do not judge anyone for what they have to do to survive*

### **Those in surrounding evacuee areas:**

#### Shelters

- Visit shelters (you will need identification and documentation of who you are)
- Ask about families in the shelters with children that have special needs
- Seek out those with children that have emotional, behavioral, or mental health problems

- Introduce your self and your organization and explain what you do (If they are from another state and you know the name of the organization there, reference that...possibly they are familiar with them)
- See if they need anything and ask about their child's services, medication, and school placement
- Ask if they have plans at this time for returning to their home or some other area
- Leave them with your number and how to contact you
- Let shelter management know about your organization and what you do
- Offer to come back
- Read to the children
- Bring books, stuffed animals (they lost theirs), toys, and games
- Stay and play with the children and talk with the parents
- Encourage them to talk with professionals staffing the shelter
- Watch for family leaders that you can begin mentoring to assist other families or at least share your message
- Offer to "take a family out" for the day
- Garner the support and assistance of others

### Families in Hotels

Many families have fled to hotels and may stay there as long as they have the money to do so or the hotel allows. These families are at risk for isolation and not being aware of assistance and support and they may not get tapped into the recovery system.

- Make organizational flyers reaching out to families
- Contact hotel managers and ask them if they have evacuee families with special needs
- Leave your number and give some simple information about what you do

- Visit and encourage families to participate in group recovery efforts (like going to a shelter for assistance in filing papers, getting counseling, developing a recovery plan)
- Help them with transportation and directions
- Let them know about the area and suggest places they might want to go such as libraries, etc
- Help them connect with immediate needs, such as getting a doctor or medication
- Their resources to stay in a hotel will run out if they cannot return home soon, help them prepare for that and transition to another evacuee area.

### **School**

- Many children will be enrolled in schools around the South East
- Contact the schools or Department of Education and let them know your organization would be willing to assist families of children with emotional, behavioral, or mental health needs coming into their system
- Let them know that this is not an advocacy effort but support to assist the school and the family with the transition
- Ask schools to refer families directly to you
- Visit schools and make contact with personnel

### **General Suggestions**

- You will not be able to do enough, but you can do something
- Develop a plan and stick to it so families know what to expect and when
- If you promise something...make sure it gets done or you at least get back and let them know why it was not possible
- If you cannot do it ask for someone else to step in
- Be sensitive to the cultural needs of families and immediately looking for support for families that is as close to their culture as possible
- Build the capacity of families to help themselves as soon as possible
- Identify new leaders and give them the support and resources to succeed

- Coordinate your needs with us so other organizations around the country that would like to assist can share the work
- Go online and learn more about FEMA (<http://www.fema.gov/press/2005/katrinavictims.shtm#assistance>) and become familiar with the services of your Red Cross (<http://www.redcross.org/where/chapts.asp>) in your state so you can assist families in need, they sometimes wait in lines for 6-10 hours a day to fill out the forms as they often need assistance and direction
- When helping a family, if you cannot answer questions on the form YOU look for the resources and answers to assist them
- When you learn of a family in need of services contact your state or area mental health services department so they become aware of the family
- Make a connection with and maintain communication with your state provider system (some states have provider organizations) and let them know you can assist families with support and possibly "non-typical" needs

### **What We Can Do to Help**

- Provide and facilitate regular toll free conference calls for support, resource sharing, and identification of needs
- Link family leaders to available resources and information
- Assist family leaders in outreach and resource-referrals
- Provide technical assistance as needed
- Assist with resource needs, such as money for gas, supplies, etc
- Provide money and other donated supplies to meet the needs of families impacted by the storm
- Locate and coordinate efforts with other partner organizations and providers