

BECOMING A RED CROSS DISASTER MENTAL HEALTH VOLUNTEER

What does the Red Cross do and what do we need?

The Red Cross provides shelter, feeding, health and mental health support to hundreds of thousands of people affected by hurricanes, floods and fires throughout the country. We are always looking to recruit new Disaster Mental Health volunteers to provide support within the local community and on out-of-state relief operations. Keep in mind that disaster relief needs are fluid and change daily. There may not be out-of-state deployment openings at the time that you complete the requirements outlined below and become a Red Cross DMH volunteer. Your participation and willingness is still quite important and valuable so you will be ready the next time disaster strikes!

To become a Red Cross Disaster Mental Health volunteer:

- All volunteer work with the American Red Cross begins at the local chapter.
- Enter your zip code under “Find your local Red Cross” at www.redcross.org to find the chapter closest to you.
- Register as a volunteer with the chapter.
 - Fill out a health status record.
 - Complete a background check.
 - Take “Foundations of Disaster Mental Health” training and “Disaster Services: An Overview.” (“Foundations” may be offered as a webinar. “Disaster Services: An Overview,” Module 1, is available online. Module 2 must be scheduled with your chapter.)
 - Fulfill any other training or paperwork that your chapter may require.
 - While you are waiting for a course or to be approved to deploy, any support you can provide to your local community through your Red Cross chapter will be of great value. (In special circumstances, you may be notified of alternative training arrangements).
- *Psychological First Aid* is also a required course for DMH volunteers. You may be able to take it after you have registered as a volunteer. Discuss this possibility with your chapter.

Be prepared for a waiting period before Red Cross training is available and before you can provide DMH support. Patience is an important volunteer characteristic.

What if I’m already a trauma specialist – why do I need special training?

- The Red Cross has a specific role in disaster response which is different from the regular work of most mental health professionals. Training is needed to understand that role.
- In order to minimize frustration, you need to understand the disaster response system and organization of the American Red Cross.
- Most trauma interventions are not appropriate in the early aftermath of disaster, but your specialized training can be helpful in identifying those who are at risk for longer-term complications.

Who is eligible to become a disaster mental health volunteer with the Red Cross?

- Independently-licensed, master’s level (or higher) mental health professionals (clinical social worker, psychologist, professional counselor, marriage and family therapist, psychiatric nurse, or psychiatrist).
- State-licensed or state-certified school counselors and school psychologists.
- RNs certified for psychiatric and mental health nursing to include RN-BC, PMHNP-BC or PMHCNS-BC.
- Must be licensed in the state in which you live.

After I’m trained how can I help locally?

- Work with your local chapter to provide support to disaster survivors in your community.

- Prepare Red Cross disaster relief workers for out-of-state assignments, support their families while they're gone and provide post-deployment support to workers returning from national assignments.
- Conduct media interviews on behalf of the chapter to discuss the common reactions individuals experience in the aftermath of disaster.
- Assist with other chapter support duties such as answering phones, preparing meals, filing, etc. While not typically considered traditional mental health services, helping out with these activities can help preserve the mental health of other Red Cross workers and staff.

How can I help outside my local community?

- Give your local Red Cross chapter your dates of availability.
- If assigned, make arrangements to be away from home for at least 10 days.
- Be prepared for the possibility that out-of-state deployment opportunities will not be available at the time you approach your local chapter.
- Be prepared for there to be a waiting period before Red Cross training is available and before you can deploy out of state.

Why does it take so long to get deployed? Why is there so much paperwork?

- Essential information and background checks are needed to ensure the safety and welfare of Red Cross clients, volunteers and partners. Preparing disaster relief workers to respond in the aftermath of disaster can be extremely challenging. Chapter staff are often overworked and are often volunteers themselves.
- The Red Cross places high value in getting the right people, to the right place, doing the right thing, at the right time. Sometimes that means taking more time before deployment in order to save time moving people later.
- Local Red Cross chapters are managing large amounts of requests from the community and from prospective volunteers.

What is different about volunteering with the Red Cross?

- **Be patient and flexible.** Situations in disaster change rapidly and needs are fluid. You may be asked to work at one site providing one type of service and then be switched to another site within a short period of time.
- **Our co-workers are also our clients.** 90% of Red Cross staff are volunteers just like you. They need your support.
- **You won't have an office.** Most mental health work done in disaster is done in non-traditional settings, like shelters and service centers. You may be providing support as you're going for a walk or sitting under a tree.
- **Provide non-traditional mental health services.**
 - Psychological first aid, triage, crisis intervention, assessment and basic support.
 - Early intervention is primarily focused on assisting disaster survivors and response workers in meeting their most basic needs:
 - Helping people feel safe and secure
 - Obtaining food and water
 - Addressing physical health needs (e.g., first aid, medications)
 - Connecting to family, friends, and other social support networks.
 - Psychotherapy is not appropriate.
- **The work is very satisfying And very frustrating.** You're working with people who have immediate needs for emotional support, food, shelter and other basics. The most crucial need is information, which often you don't have because the situation is constantly changing. We do the best we can with the limited resources we have.