

# **VISN 16 – Natural Disaster Preparedness and Recovery Response Protocol**

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

**White Paper**

**VA**



**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

Developed by  
**VHA National Homeless Program Office**

## INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Program Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16: South Central VA Health Care Network has been recognized as a region with an innovative practice for their comprehensive natural disaster preparedness and recovery protocol.

## PRACTICE OVERVIEW

### **Standardized disaster preparedness is effective in ensuring Veteran safety during emergencies.**

While natural disasters are often low probability events, they are high impact when they do occur. The damage caused can be extensive and overwhelm the resources and support systems of vulnerable populations. To ensure that Veterans engaging in homeless services receive the support needed to safely manage disasters, homeless program staff within VISN 16 and its associated VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) have developed procedures to ensure that all staff and Veterans are prepared should a disaster strike. Though this process can work for many kinds of emergencies, in the Gulf Coast region, it is most commonly used with hurricanes.

As the Atlantic hurricane season starts on June 1 and lasts through November 30, preparation starts before the season even begins. Each spring, VISN leadership ensures that all homeless program staff across the 8 VAMCs, spanning six states, as well as all Veterans served by VAMC homeless programs, are educated on the appropriate procedures. This involves providing local guidance on expectations when storms hit, crisis hotline numbers, radio stations that provide storm coverage, the locations of flood and evacuation zones, the locations of the nearest emergency disaster shelters, and hurricane supply lists. Veterans with special needs such as medical oxygen or mobility limitations are assisted with completing City and County special assistance program applications. VISN 16 requires that all Veterans participating in homeless services have disaster preparedness plans, updated annually or when transitioning across programs, that are documented clearly in the Veteran's Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS) record. These plans list the names and contact information for every member of the Veterans household, information about pets, the types of disasters most likely to impact their household, evacuation plans, communication plans if the household is separated, special needs, and the preidentified location within their home if instructed by local authorities to "shelter in place".

Once the VISN becomes aware of an oncoming storm by the National Weather Service, the staff moves to the mitigation phase. Within 72 hours of projected impact, the VISN oversees assessments on all programs within the areas affected while facility homeless program staff contact all Grant and &

Per Diem (GPD) programs, Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Contract Residential Services (CRS) programs, and Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Veteran participants to verify that their emergency plans are up-to-date. Additionally, contact information for all staff and Veterans are updated and a pre-storm census is taken. This information is documented in a VISN-wide Recovery Management Tracker spreadsheet for use after the storm passes to account for the hundreds of staff and Veterans involved. Veterans are advised to have at least two weeks of medicine on hand in case of delays in obtaining refills. Though mostly done via telephone, staff will attempt to contact unreachable Veterans in person. Veterans who plan to evacuate are asked to notify their local case managers, within 24 hours of the storm's passing, of their location and status. The mitigation phase is also used to build capacity for when the storm passes, with VISN staff reaching out to neighboring VISNs not impacted by the storm to identify resources that can be brought in.

After the event is over, the VISN moves to the assessment and recovery phase. When facility emergency management teams activate, the VAMC homeless program leads become members of the command centers to provide status updates on the various programs. Using the Recovery Management Tracker, VAMC staff work together to ensure that all homeless program staff and Veterans are contacted and accounted for. This process starts with verifying staff safety and workforce readiness before moving on to verifying Veteran safety. Also, within 24-48 hours of the storm's passing, response teams of available VAMC homeless program staff visit all activated emergency shelters to identify any Veterans that may be there. To cover rural areas, the VISN will partner with Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grantees or the Red Cross. **With both Hurricane Harvey and Irma in 2017, use of the Recovery Management Tracker allowed the VISN to ensure, with confidence, that every Veteran and staff member was safe and accounted for, ready to rebuild, rehouse, and to prepare for the next event.**

## CONCLUSION

Disaster preparedness plays a critical role in ensuring Veteran safety. With the potential for these high impact events to occur more frequently in the future, having clear, comprehensive, and standardized plans is an absolute necessity. During FY 2018, the Homeless Program Office, in consultation with VISNs 8 and 16, is developing a national directive to operationalize disaster response processes and serve as an operational template for Network Homeless Coordinators. The directive will also set forth the responsibilities of homeless programs, and the coordination actions within VISN and medical center emergency management offices. We would like to thank the dedicated staff at the VISN 16 for sharing this practice. If you have any questions about this practice, please contact Dorothy Thomas, Network Homeless Coordinator, at [Dorothy.Thomas@va.gov](mailto:Dorothy.Thomas@va.gov).