

MIAMI INCLUSION ALLIANCE By: Sharon Langer Esq.

We are now in hurricane season and history tells us, that for victims of domestic violence/sexual assault, when disaster strikes domestic violence follows. There are usually increased calls to hotlines, urgent need for shelter and extreme stress and economic impact. The violence can take many forms, from intimate partner violence, sexual assault and to child abuse.

Those who work in the domestic violence provider world have seen the aftermath of a storm and know what might be coming. Meg Baldwin, the Executive Director of Refuge House, which works to end domestic violence in the eight northern panhandle counties in Florida explains, “Weather events like these and disasters, in general, are opportunities for abusers—both domestic violence attackers and sexual assault perpetrators—to take advantage of the restrictive access survivors have to resources and to also take advantage of the isolation in the aftermath that survivors experience. That isolation becomes even more intense and is even more of an opportunity for attackers to harm others.”

The Louisiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence reported that after Hurricane Katrina, women were being assaulted by their partners in emergency shelters.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in Miami-Dade in 1992, spousal abuse calls to the local help line increased by 50 percent, and more than one-third of 1,400 surveyed residents reported that someone in their home had lost verbal or physical control in the two months after the hurricane. (The Gender and Disaster Network)

Domestic violence hotlines may be disconnected. During and after a disaster, it can be more challenging for victims to obtain services and aid.

Emergency responders can be overwhelmed, sometimes leaving abuse victims to fend for themselves. That, in turn, can lead them to return to or remain with their abuser.

If an aid agency cuts a check to the family, who controls that check? If you’ve lost your home, and the shelter is now destroyed, and your abuser has the check, and you’re displaced from your family and friends.

Other states have created a training curriculum with best practices for disaster management in the context of domestic violence. Suggestions for that curriculum include budgeting for disasters, keeping supplies like generators on-site, at existing domestic violence shelters so current residents don’t have to leave them in a disasters, securing internet access at each shelter, and designating a disaster specialist or team to lead the organization in the event of an emergency.

We do not have a concrete plan in Miami-Dade County to address this issue.

Here are some of the **Key Recommendations** to establish a community that is prepared. (After the Crisis Initiative: Healing from Trauma after Disasters Resource Paper: Victims of Violence in Times of Disaster or Emergency-Helga West).

Create a comprehensive plan to respond to the specific needs of victims of domestic violence/sexual assault that identifies all the resources available in the county and how to access them. This needs to address: shelter before and after the storm, protections within shelters to avoid further abuse, outline

specific plans for all agencies that serve this population, establishing culturally competent peer-support systems on disaster response teams and within victim service systems, and providing a means for survivors to receive meaningful support, while lessening some of the culturally imposed stigma associated with reporting violent crimes.

Create a training curriculum with best practices for disaster management in the context of domestic violence.

Create a central disaster response database that will serve as a platform for service providers (government, nonprofit, faith-based, and others) to share their organization's profile, the services they have available to respond to disasters.

Establish culturally competent peer-support systems on disaster response teams and within federal, state, foundation, corporate, and faith-based sources to be directed to peer-support and trauma-informed models that support the long-term trauma needs of individuals, families, and communities.

Advocate for a Trauma Education and Awareness Campaign, supported by state, and local governments that educates on understanding coping strategies and fosters healing.

Educate the news media on the trauma-related implications of reporting. e.g., what can be re-traumatizing, what will help inform and empower, and what impact repeating violent images can have.

In conclusion, to ensure that survivors have the best support possible in the aftermath of disasters, we need to focus on collaboration, education, communication, and sustained trauma-informed support.

It is time for this community to do the hard work and create a Hurricane Plan for our victims of domestic violence/sexual assault.