



## **OBH staff member delivers emotional support during times of crisis**

While the external damage of a disaster is usually obvious, there is often an emotional toll that is much harder to see. To meet the needs of those struggling to recover after a disaster, Joleen Chiaverini, outreach and disaster response coordinator in the Office of Behavioral Health (OBH), works with the Disaster Crisis Outreach and Referral Team to offer emotional and logistical support.

Deployed by Emergency Management or the Red Cross to disaster situations, Joleen and her team speak one-on-one with individuals impacted by the disaster to determine tangible needs such as water, medication, clothing, or puzzles and books to keep children entertained while also looking for signs of trauma reactions.

If an individual is experiencing a crisis after a disaster, Joleen and her team can facilitate a connection to behavioral health services. For those who are already receiving mental or behavioral health treatment, the team coordinates with the individuals' current treatment provider to find ways to best meet their needs.

"A disaster – whether it is a blizzard, house fire, mudslide, or any other event – is going to have some sort of emotional effect on everyone who experiences it," Joleen said. "Our goal is to help individuals get back to their pre-disaster functioning and well-being while also showing those affected that trauma reactions are completely normal."

In addition to supporting disaster response efforts, Joleen works in the community to share information with various groups and organizations about programs and services available to meet the needs of community members. Each month, she works with law enforcement partners to provide training to local police departments on mental health diagnoses and de-escalation techniques.

"Someone who is in the middle of a mental health crisis may act in a way that comes across as defiant or aggressive. By educating police officers on the possible reasons why someone may be acting the way they are and offering alternative ways to engage with that person, we are hoping to avoid physical confrontations between police and individuals who are experiencing symptoms. The ultimate outcome is to

reduce injury to officers and individuals experiencing a crisis and to divert them from jail to the Mercy Central Recovery Center, Resolve, or the hospital, when appropriate,” Joleen continued.

Joleen is investigating best practice approaches to addressing hoarding disorder in the hopes of improving the current services and supports available in Allegheny County. In addition, she coordinates Mental Health First Aid – a course that teaches how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders – with Allegheny Health Choices, Inc. (AHC). Plans are in place to expand Mental Health First Aid trainings to housing agencies as well as the spiritual community.

“Educating the community about behavioral health issues and how to assist someone in crisis – whether by police officer, disaster responder or general community member – is critical in a time of increased need and limited resources,” added Joleen. “I am always available as a resource, and if I can’t help with a mental or behavioral health question, I’ll work to find the person who can.”

To learn more about OBH’s outreach and disaster efforts, contact Joleen at [Joleen.chiaverini@alleghenycounty.us](mailto:Joleen.chiaverini@alleghenycounty.us).