

# DHS NEWS

## Next Month

**YANSA**

**Stone Soup  
Hunger and  
Homelessness  
Rally**

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**VOLUME 7, ISSUE 10**

**OCTOBER 2004**

## DHS staff and providers rise to meet catastrophic needs

**F**ollowing the disaster of September 11, 2001, DHS and Allegheny County tightened plans for an instantaneous emergency response across all county departments and the interface with private agencies, faith-based organizations and other providers of care. DHS, through its Disaster Team, focused in particular on developing new protocols involving internal communication, rapid contact with providers and thereby with consumers, and seamless coordinated efforts between all DHS offices. On Friday, September 17, 2004 the new procedures were put to the test.

The aftermath of Hurricane Ivan dropped record-breaking, flood-producing rains that turned entire Allegheny County neighborhoods into federal disaster areas. In all, 80 municipalities were so declared. The devastation came on instantly. The response was just as immediate. Before the storm moved on, the county's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was up and running, staffed 24 hours a day by representatives from all county departments including DHS. Bob Stumpp of the Office of Information Management (OIM) and Lucille Underwood of the Office of Behavior Health (OBH) took the reigns for DHS, coordinating and executing the plans laid out in the calm of meetings past.

As planned, all DHS program and support offices assumed emergency mode. As the workweek began, normal operations necessarily meshed with urgent requests from individuals, provider agencies, media contacts and state and federal government representatives. Coordinated with the county and DHS communications offices, emergency numbers and up-to-date resource information were provided to the public.

Within 24 hours, before the flood waters had crested, DHS staff worked valiantly, using newly developed information systems, to first ascertain the needs of particularly vulnerable consumers already receiving services through DHS. Then they expanded their reach through DHS staff and through DHS provider agencies to the entire affected

population including those newly in desperate need of safe housing, viable food and water, replacement medications and critical mental health counseling. Shelters and hotels in the area became the living quarters for the newly displaced. Clothing and food donations poured in.

As flood waters receded, the grand scope of need became evident. Major and minor appliances, food supplies, vehicles, precious heirlooms, whole households were lost. Widespread loss and destruction taxed the mental health of many. With the opening of the centralized Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Disaster Recovery Center, DHS and its provider agencies kicked into high gear.

DHS and provider case managers worked with the American Red Cross to coordinate services for those in need. In addition, twelve of our own DHS staff volunteered to work for a week as Red Cross case managers, disregarding normal business hours. Through OBH, vital mental health counseling became readily available. Teams of mental health workers paired with representatives from the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) to go door-to-door in areas particularly hard hit. The Office of Community Services (OCS) coordinated with the Urban League to speed up rental assistance and food voucher processing for flood victims. AAA waived restrictions to its Home Delivered Meal Program. In all, several thousand flood victims sought and received support in various forms through DHS and its provider agencies.

Throughout the process DHS Director Marc Cherna was encouraged by the response of DHS staff and its provider network. "I am proud of our staff in all of our offices and agencies for the way they responded to the affected communities and for their generosity and compassion in reaching out to help the folks they work with. It was essential that they be willing to work extended hours, to push the limits of their job descriptions and to work effectively under pressure. And they did. Our job is not over yet and I know we will be there for as long as it takes."