DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response

Assistant Secretary for
Preparedness and Response
Washington, D.C. 20201

American Association on Health and Disability
110 N. Washington Street, Suite 407
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear American Association on Health and Disability:

Thank you for your letter emphasizing the importance of integrating mental health and substance use programs throughout the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR). We could not agree more.

ASPR's mission is to assist the country in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from public health emergencies and disasters. In doing so, ASPR places great emphasis on the mental health, behavioral health, and substance use considerations of individuals affected by public health emergencies and disasters. ASPR recognizes behavioral health as an integral part of overall public health and medical preparedness, response, and recovery.

This work primarily takes place within ASPR's Division of Community Mitigation and Recovery (DCMR). DCMR is tasked with integrating behavioral health into ASPR's response and recovery operations through two key programs (1) the Disaster Behavioral Health Program and (2) ASPR's Recovery Program. These programs are representative of the importance ASPR places on addressing mental health and substance use disorder challenges exacerbated by disasters in terms of risks to responders and to the general population.

The first program, ASPR's Disaster Behavioral Health Program, provides internal technical assistance to decisionmakers and response program officials throughout ASPR to promote the integration of behavioral health issues into ASPR's response activities under Emergency Support Function (ESF) 8. The Disaster Behavioral Health Program staffs a behavioral health element in the Secretary's Operations Center to support integration of behavioral health priorities and concerns into operational decision-making for ESF 8 missions. The Disaster Behavioral Health Program also partners with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and other federal partners to provide support to state, local, territorial, and tribal jurisdictions on disaster behavioral health issues.

In addition, ASPR's Disaster Behavioral Health Program convenes the Federal Disaster Behavioral Health Group, comprised of federal agencies across HHS and other Cabinet Departments, to develop a common operating picture on disaster behavioral health needs when events occur and identify any gaps in support. The Disaster Behavioral Health Program has developed trainings and webinars in disaster behavioral health, stress management, crisis communication, responder resilience, Psychological First Aid, and evidence-informed workforce strategies for emergency responders. In the past two years, the Program has delivered more than

30 trainings to over 3,000 participants. The Program is also increasingly integrated into the operations of the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) when teams deploy to respond to crises, supporting NDMS with subject matter expertise on behavioral health needs and operating a Post Deployment Responder Check-in Call Program, which provides pre-clinical force health protection for HHS response personnel following deployments. Since the program was started in July 2020, 3,912 responder callbacks have taken place.

The second program, ASPR's Recovery Program, coordinates the Health and Social Services Recovery Support Function (HSS RSF), one of the six Recovery Support Functions under the National Disaster Recovery Framework, to provide federal operational support to states, tribes, territories, and local governments in long-term disaster recovery. Because behavioral health is one of the core mission areas of the HSS RSF, ASPR delivers targeted interventions promoting community coping and addressing disaster-related mental health and substance use issues when the HSS RSF is activated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Working in partnership with SAMHSA, the U.S. Department of Education, and other federal agencies, ASPR integrates behavioral health into all aspects of recovery operations. Specific interventions include behavioral health needs assessments, large-scale trainings in Psychological First Aid and Skills for Psychological Recovery, and delivery of technical assistance and help finding funding sources are provided. Between fiscal years 2020-2022, ASPR has been activated to support recovery operations for 14 disaster events, and behavioral health components of the mission have been central to all of them.

ASPR remains committed to providing mental and behavioral health services for all individuals across our country that are impacted by disasters or public health emergencies and we will continue to look for additional ways to integrate mental and behavioral health into the work that we do every day.

Thank you again for your letter and for your commitment to improving the mental well-being of Americans. I hope this information is helpful to your organizations.

Sincerely,

Dawn O'Connell