

## Preparing for a Disaster Assignment

### A Rewarding and Challenging Opportunity

Disaster relief work can be very rewarding. It provides an opportunity to have a profound and positive impact on the lives of those who may be in their greatest time of need. However, the work can also be very challenging and stressful. During an assignment, you may experience chaotic environments, long hours, rapidly changing information and directives, long wait times before getting to work and living quarters that are less than ideal. You may also be exposed to unfamiliar and graphic sights, smells and sounds of destruction. Many volunteers will provide services to survivors who are overwhelmed. The decision whether to go on a disaster assignment should be carefully considered. Is this the right time for you and your family? Remember, there will always be other opportunities to help.

### Getting Ready to Deploy

- ▶ Gather information about conditions at the disaster operation, so you can bring appropriate clothing and supplies.
- ▶ Make sure your supply of personal medications is sufficient to last several days beyond the expected length of your deployment, so that an unexpected delay in your return would be covered.
- ▶ Make arrangements with your employer and arrange for the care of dependent family members and pets.
- ▶ Complete all the necessary deployment paperwork at your chapter. Check the toll-free deployment phone line for updates immediately before departing, and again upon arrival at your destination.
- ▶ Provide your family with your chapter phone number, so they will be able to access support and emergency communication services while you are deployed.

### Building Resilience

Successfully managing the challenges of disaster relief work requires taking care of yourself before, during, and after your assignment. The good news is that we all have resilience—ways to help us bounce back after difficult times—even in the face of our greatest challenges. Disasters can bring forth strong emotions, even among very experienced workers, and during the course of a deployment such reactions will vary. Workers may experience strong feelings of frustration, disappointment, sadness, anger and fear, as well as memory slips and



insomnia. Fortunately, such reactions are usually balanced by feelings of excitement, pride, joy, satisfaction and friendship. Focusing on these positives is one way of practicing resilience. Below are some resilience strategies that can help you manage stress reactions while on assignment.

- ▶ **Stay Safe.** The Red Cross is committed to maintaining a safe work environment for its workers. Be sure to attend all work orientations and briefings and follow all safety precautions and guidelines. If you have any concerns, talk with your supervisor. Knowing that you have done everything you can to stay safe can also help you relax and focus on your work. We're all part of a team, so you can also help by keeping an eye out for the safety of others.
- ▶ **Prioritize Your Work.** Disaster relief efforts create pressure to accomplish much in a short amount of time. Work with your supervisor to prioritize tasks and set achievable goals. Keep focused on what you are accomplishing, and do not let what remains to be done overwhelm or discourage you.
- ▶ **Make Self-Care Your First Priority.** Disaster survivors are best served when you stay strong and energized. Try to get enough sleep. Take breaks, don't work through your assigned day off, eat healthy foods, drink plenty of water and make efforts to manage your stress. Exercise and stretching are great stress relievers. Keep in mind that excessive

or high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse can complicate an already challenging situation. Assert yourself and ask for help if you are uncomfortable with an aspect of your work or surroundings.

- ▶ **Stay Connected.** One of the best ways to stay positive is by connecting with other workers. We experience a common bond because of our shared mission. If you are inexperienced, partnering with someone else can be especially helpful. You will no doubt find ways of being of assistance to your “disaster buddy,” too! For many workers, staying in touch with family and friends also serves as a means of support. Calling home each day has helped many workers release their daily stress. By sharing your ups and downs and showing appreciation for those who listen, you both stay connected and provide support to one another.
- ▶ **Maintain a Hopeful Outlook.** Regularly remind yourself of what you are accomplishing: providing for the emergency needs of survivors, and helping them along their path toward recovery. Destruction and despair may be present in the moment, but so is the spark of hope—that human thread that connects us all. Many people are being helped, and progress is being made.
- ▶ **Manage Work Relationships Professionally.** While on assignment, you will participate with teams of other workers and supervisors that you may have never met. This can be exciting, but may also present challenges. Everyone has their own style of working and communicating. Some of these styles will feel comfortable, while others may feel irritating. In addition, you may not receive your preferred job assignment. You might have different ideas about how things should be done. Every disaster worker experiences these thoughts or feelings at some point. Keeping the larger disaster mission foremost in your mind can help you cope constructively with these challenges. Be patient, tolerant and flexible with your teammates. Communicate calmly, and remember to focus more on solutions than pointing fingers.

- ▶ **Use Calming Strategies.** Consider the usual strategies you use to relax or calm yourself, and how they might be helpful while on assignment. For example, some people like to tell a joke, have a good laugh, give someone a hug, exercise or take a walk around the block. Taking periodic breaks away from stressful surroundings can help you “catch your breath.” Get a snack when you are hungry and drink plenty of water. If your situation begins feeling tense, slow down and take a few deep breaths. Notice which of your muscles are tight, and stretch and release them, exhaling slowly as you do so. Finally, listen to your thoughts. If you find yourself feeling especially stressed, frustrated or pessimistic, focus more on the positive actions that you and others are taking right now that are helping others. Remember that Disaster Mental Health workers will be there to support the Red Cross team.
- ▶ **Watch for Training Opportunities.** Feeling confident about your disaster work skills can contribute to your sense of strength and resilience. Some operations offer training in new skills. Working alongside experienced workers and supervisors on a disaster assignment also serves as an excellent training opportunity. Watch for such opportunities, and take advantage of them when possible.

## You Are the Most Valuable Resource of the Red Cross

The Red Cross could not accomplish its disaster mission without your gifts of time and compassion. By taking care of yourself and building on your resilience, you will be able to provide the support that disaster survivors need for the future. **Thank you!**



Please take care of yourself and be kind to yourself.  
Save some of yourself for you.  
You are very important to us.