



Challenges for the disaster workforce during a compound hurricane–pandemic

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ABSTRACT

assisting clients with special medical needs. Faith-based organizations are another vital contributor to the response, along with Community Organizations

Researchers and practitioners recognize that disaster work is stressful and exhausting, and prolonged engagement in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery efforts can, over time, cause burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic is already imposing an emotional and physical toll on healthcare workers.^{33,34}

Healthcare workers face challenges associated with the pandemic response, such as limited resources, longer shifts, excessive workloads, disruptions to sleep, inadequate personal protective equipment, and related occupational hazards associated with COVID-19 exposures.

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based on the discussion in their breakout group. For each workshop, an After Action Report was compiled from emergent themes from these summaries of each breakout group. The detailed summaries, After Action Reports, transcription of breakout discussions, and online chat comments were further analyzed by the research team to identify key themes relevant to answering the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The project identifies three issues from practitioner and subject matter expert perspectives and describes the potential impacts. These are discussed in relation to the resources and strategies suggested to reconcile capacity and demand.

Complexity of mass sheltering during a hurricane–pandemic

The management of sheltering operations is complex, touching upon facilities management, staffing, resources and supplies, logistics, security, and care for clients, among other critical tasks. Management of sheltering operations under the current public health crisis adds another layer of complexity. Specifically, workshop participants highlighted that risk perceptions within the general population, as well as among disaster workers, are altered under the COVID-19 environment. These risk perceptions permeate the management of sheltering across nearly every domain and, as workshop participants noted, meant that management and operational approaches need to be adjusted to this new reality.

Facilities. Workshop participants noted that facilities management is a critical component of sheltering operations. Participants highlighted that facilities management is a complex task that involves a wide range of activities, including site selection, site preparation, site construction, site operation, and site closure. Participants noted that facilities management is a complex task that involves a wide range of activities, including site selection, site preparation, site construction, site operation, and site closure. Participants noted that facilities management is a complex task that involves a wide range of activities, including site selection, site preparation, site construction, site operation, and site closure.

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Expanded skillsets and competencies. Participants noted that the current public health crisis has created a need for expanded skillsets and competencies among sheltering staff. Participants noted that the current public health crisis has created a need for expanded skillsets and competencies among sheltering staff. Participants noted that the current public health crisis has created a need for expanded skillsets and competencies among sheltering staff.

Another challenge raised by workshop participants is that fear is at an all-time high; racial tensions, violence, and other inequities have contributed to mistrust; and the political environment is polarized and charged. Therefore, the job of managing and overseeing large groups of people within a congregate shelter may feel less safe and more stressful than ever before. There is a need to engage new partners and bring new workers to the table who have the people skills and cultural competence to manage shelters in such an environment and to provide person-centric and family-centered services.

Inadequate workforce

Participants recognized that a limited workforce will be available to staff these shelters, and that individuals who are already burned out from a months-long pandemic may also be the ones asked to staff the

shelters. Trained staff and volunteers are the pillars of shelter operations and the successful management of these coordination efforts. Staff and volunteers also come from the communities that shelters intend to serve. Thus, many risk perceptions and cross-pressures experienced by the populations at-large are also relevant to the shelter staff. Workshop participants noted that they expect there will be hesitancy or the inability of some shelter staff and volunteers to be present for duties given concerns about contracting COVID-19. Furthermore, workshop participants noted that government agencies have undertaken

Table 1. Research questions related to disaster planning during and after COVID-19 (continued)
• What stressors (chronic and acute) in the evacuation and sheltering process are introduced or exacerbated due to COVID-19?
• How can shelter staff balance the need to protect their and others' psychological health during a compound hurricane-pandemic threat with necessarily limited time and resources?

Largely, the workshops served as a channel for emergency management personnel to express concerns, ask questions, and share their resources and recommendations. The blend of response levels and experience present at the workshops revealed the comradery among the disaster workforce and the limited opportunities to share beneficial resources. The researchers fostered this communication through facilitated discussions, the dissemination of After Action Reports, and collection of resources from various agencies to make available to participants.

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