

Mental Health Care Is Also Hurricane Victim

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Mental health issues top the list of ways Louisianans say the 2005 hurricanes affected the health of people in their communities, according to a new statewide survey. The findings were released on Tuesday (April 29) at a forum cosponsored by the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

According to the poll, symptoms such as increased anxiety, stress and depression were cited more often than other factors, including property destruction or physical illness. A majority (58 percent) of Louisiana residents polled said there are not enough resources such as specialized health care and medicines in their community to treat people who need mental health services today, two and a half years after hurricanes Katrina and Rita. They also believe more can be done to support local and state health departments that are expected to prepare for and respond to health threats.

Louisianans surveyed, however, acknowledged the importance of a range of individuals and groups with helping to improve health conditions since the hurricanes, including hospitals (92 percent), volunteers (92 percent), healthcare professionals (91 percent), religious groups (90 percent) and the business community (88 percent).

Much progress has been made in restoring the psychiatric infrastructure in New Orleans after Katrina, according to panelists at the forum that was moderated by Dr. Corey Hebert, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the Tulane School of Medicine, chief medical director for WDSU-TV and medical director for the Louisiana Recovery School District.

Dr. Neil W. Boris, an assistant professor of child psychiatry at the Tulane School of Medicine, said, "Research into infants' mental health has lagged behind other areas, and catastrophic events like Katrina show the need for further investment in this and other areas of mental health research. In my work studying how traumatic experiences affect the ways infants bond with their mothers, we also see the impact

on a child's later relationships."

On the positive side, the poll showed that many (69 percent) think those who survived the hurricanes have developed new skills for coping with disaster.

"Much more is needed to address mental health and public health in Louisiana, but the good news is that Louisianans are finding new ways to cope," said Dr. Cathryn Clary, vice president of external medical affairs for Pfizer.

According to said Karen Goraleski, director of public health advocacy for Research!America, "The poll and forum show how partnerships among academia, business, government and volunteers can spark dialogue that leads to actions. We must make it a priority in Louisiana and nationally to invest in public and mental health research, to improve the health of our communities, our nation and our economy."

In the poll, 93 percent said medical and health research is crucial to the state's economy, and 97 percent said it is important for Louisiana to be a leader in medical and health research ? yet only 32 percent said the state currently is in a leadership position.

The meeting, convened by Research!America, Pfizer, Tulane and Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, was supported by Pfizer.

Charlton Research Co. conducted the poll by random telephone calls with a sample of 800 adults in Louisiana. The entire sample was proportionate to the state's demographics and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent. Nine in 10 of those participating in the poll were living in Louisiana or the Gulf Coast region when the hurricanes hit in 2005; more than half (54 percent) currently reside in the state's coastal parishes.