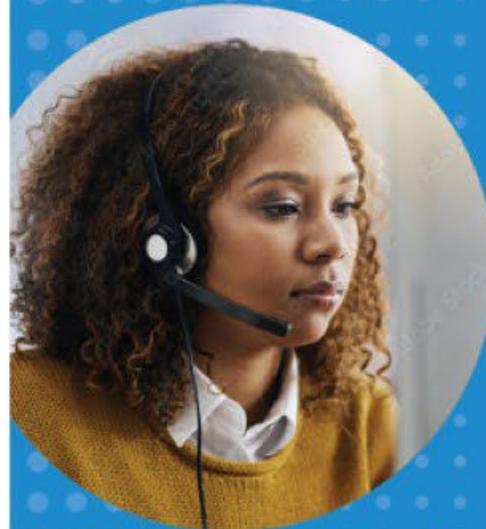




# Behavioral Health Needs in Disaster Preparation and Response

October 26, 2025

*Shari Sinwelski, MS, EdS, LPCC  
Vice President of Crisis Care  
Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services  
[ssinwelski@didihirsch.org](mailto:ssinwelski@didihirsch.org)*



# Disaster Experience: Personal and Professional



# Disaster Experience: Personal and Professional

## Flooding in St. Pete, FL

1979

Flooding in St. Pete on May 8, 1979, was a result of a massive storm that brought over 11 inches of rainfall to the area. This storm led to significant destruction, with 17.6 inches of rain falling in St. Pete during a 14-hour period. The heavy rainfall caused power outages, road and bridge washouts, and the evacuation of about 200 people from their homes. The storm was particularly devastating due to its unexpected timing, as May was typically a dry month in the Tampa Bay area.

1979

2004

2024

2025

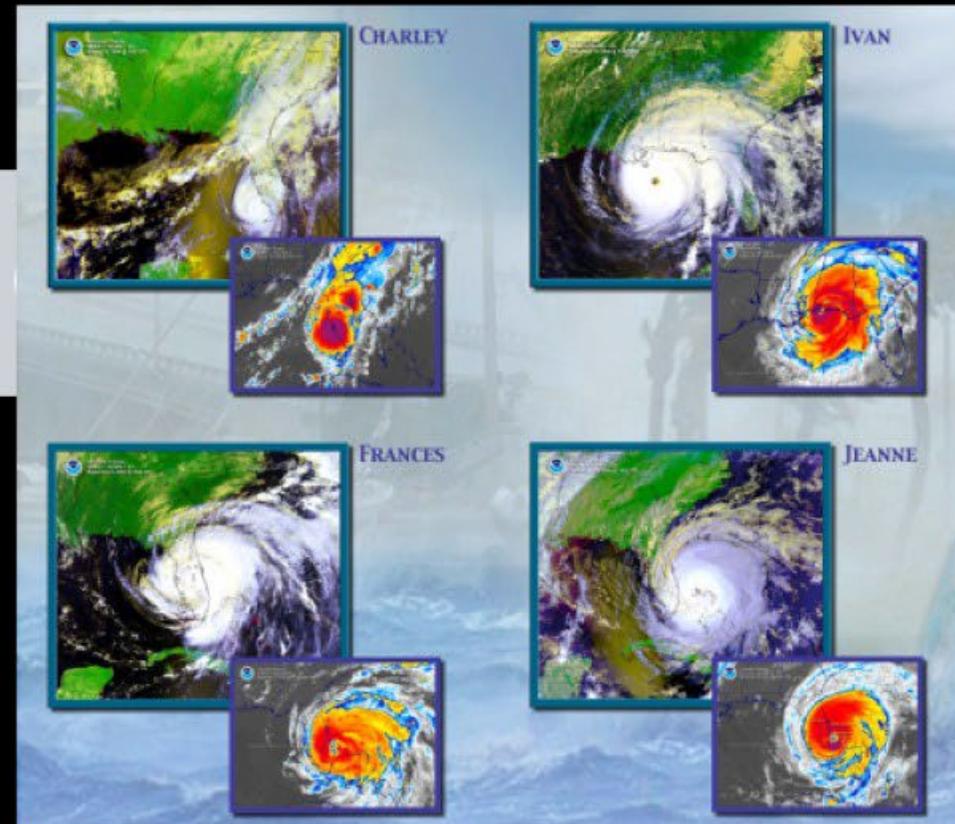


# Disasters Experience: Personal and Professional

## State of Florida Hurricanes “The Plywood State”

2004

Florida, officially known as the “Sunshine State,” was dubbed the “Plywood State” by media after it was battered by four hurricanes in just six weeks during the 2004 hurricane season. Nearly every square inch of Florida felt the impacts from at least one of those four storms..



# Disaster Experience: Personal and Professional

## Hurricane Katrina

2005

Hurricane Katrina was an extremely powerful and devastating tropical cyclone that killed 1,392 people and caused damage estimated at \$125 billion, in New Orleans and the surrounding gulf coast, in late August 2005.



1979

2004

2024

2025



# VOAD

## Definition:

*VOAD stands for Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters. It is a coalition of nonprofit organizations that work together to assist survivors during and after disasters. The primary purpose of VOAD is to enhance coordination among various organizations to improve disaster response and recovery efforts. VOAD includes a range of agencies that are active in all phases of disaster management, including preparation, response, recovery, and mitigation.*



**NATIONAL  
VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS  
ACTIVE IN DISASTER**

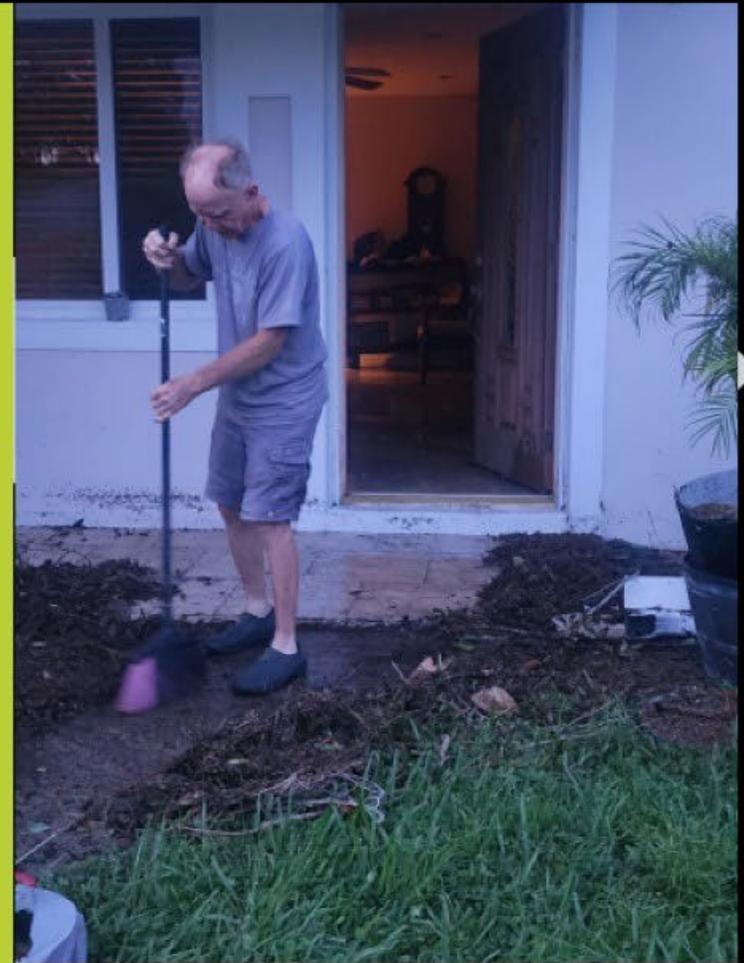
# Disaster Experience: Personal and Professional



## Hurricanes Helene and Milton

2024

Hurricanes Helene and Milton were two of the most devastating storms to hit Florida in recent history, causing major destruction, significant loss of life, and financial losses expected to surpass \$50 billion each. Hurricane Helene struck on September 26, 2024, making landfall as a Category 4 hurricane, primarily impacting the Big Bend region of Florida and spreading destruction across the southeastern United States. Hurricane Milton followed less than two weeks later, also reaching major hurricane strength, and significantly affected Florida's west coast, further exacerbating the damage already caused by Helene.



# Disaster Experience: Personal and Professional

## LA Fires

2025

From January 7 to 31, 2025, a series of 14 destructive wildfires affected the Los Angeles metropolitan area and San Diego County in California. The wildfires killed between 31 and 440 people, forced more than 200,000 to evacuate, destroyed more than 18,000 homes and structures, and burned over 57,529 acres of land in total. Most of the damage was from the two largest fires: the Eaton Fire in Altadena and the Palisades Fire in Pacific Palisades. The deaths and damage to property from these two fires made them likely the second- and third-most destructive fires in California's history, respectively.



# Numbers Served: Over 4800!

## First Responders

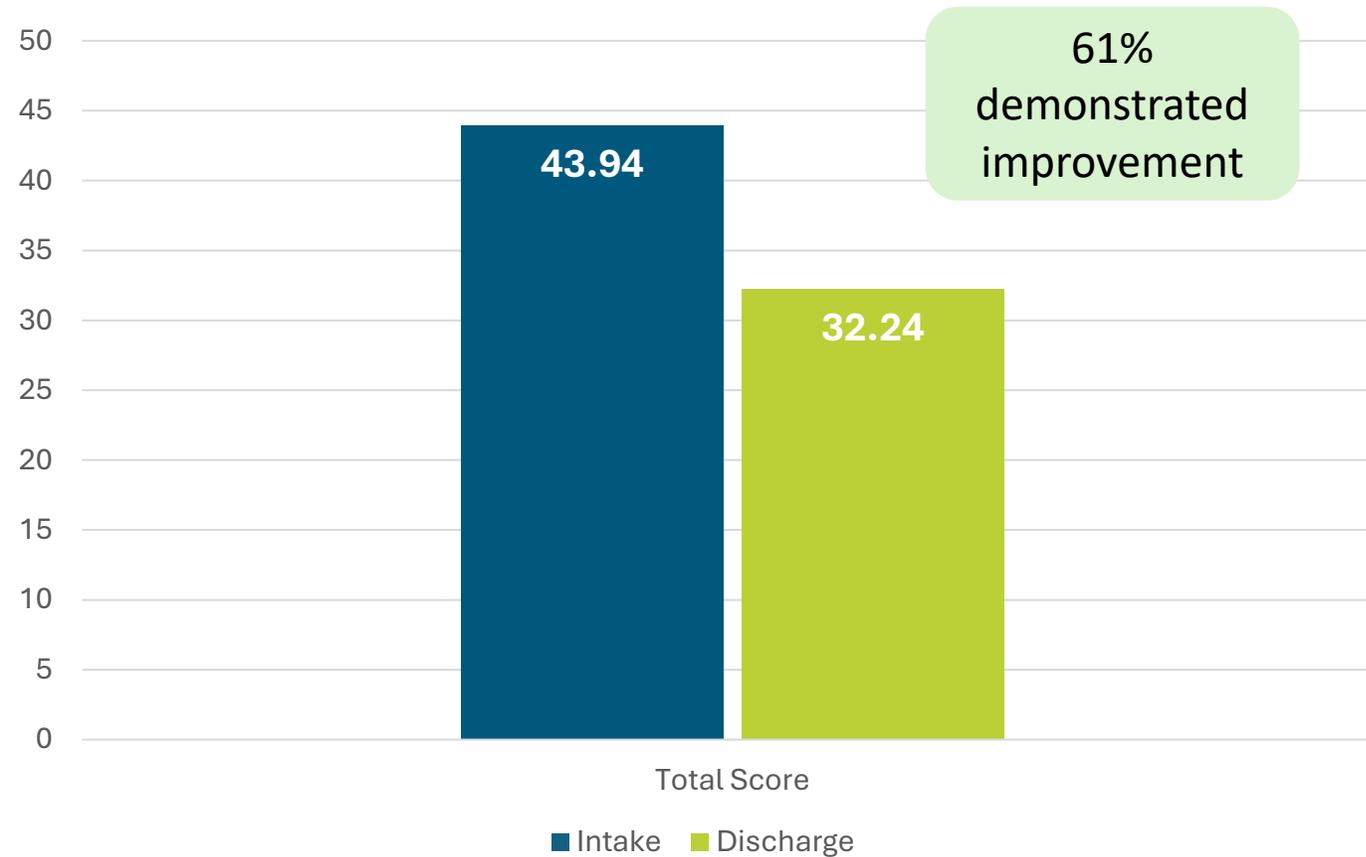
- 172 LAFD Peer Support Team Trained
- 2 Fire Fighters through MH Counseling
- 2 Drop in Groups Attempted

## Community Members Directly Impacted

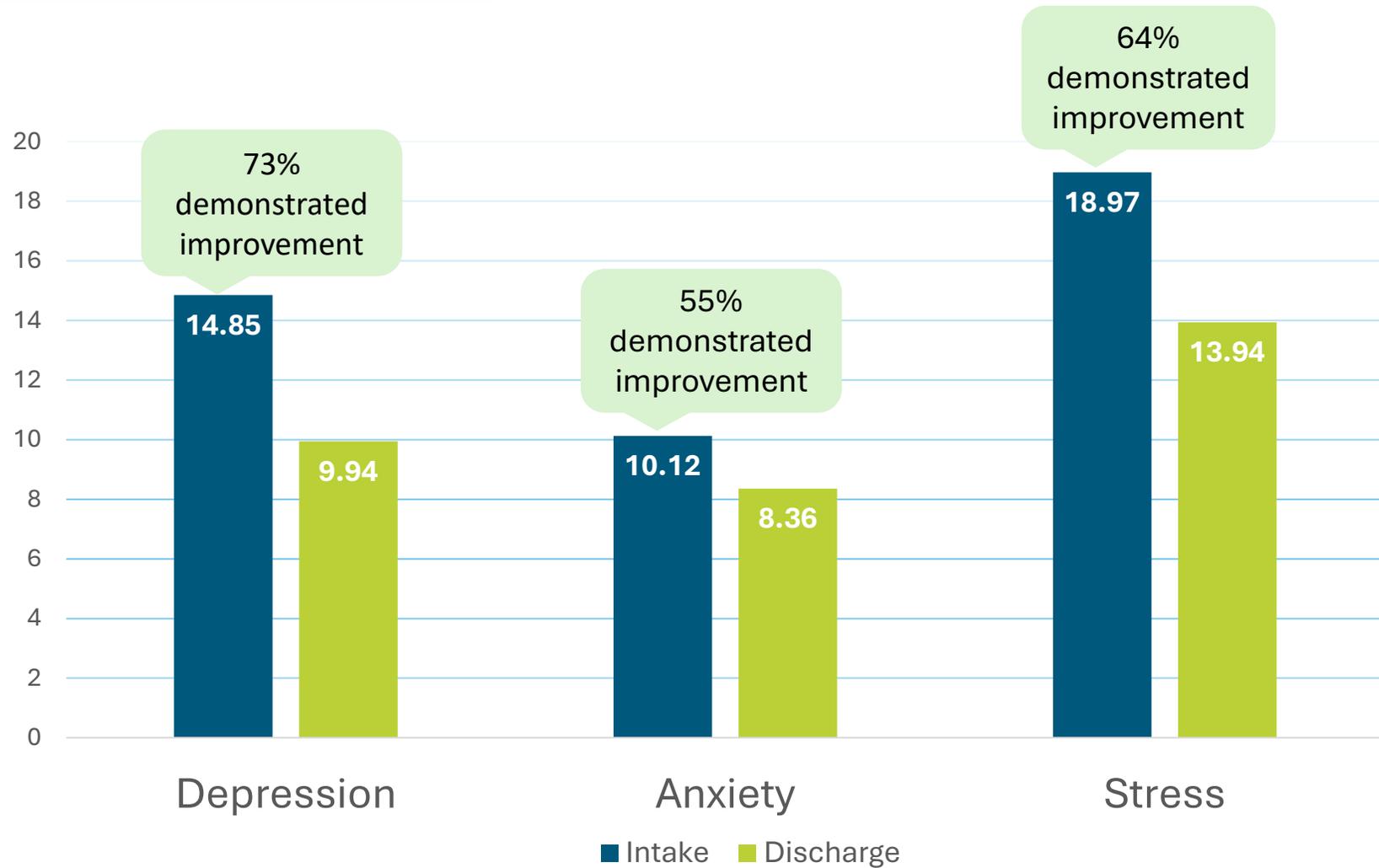
- 13 through 2 Drop in Group
- 129 through MH Counseling
- 4500+ at Disaster response centers

# Outcomes: DASS

## Depression Anxiety Stress Scales



# Outcomes by Subscale



# Disaster Behavioral Health Planning Resources

## SAMSHA Disaster Training and Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)

Links to toolkits, newsletter sign-up, tip sheets, etc.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/technical-assistance/dtac/resources>

## SAMSHA Disaster Behavioral Health All Hazards Planning Guide

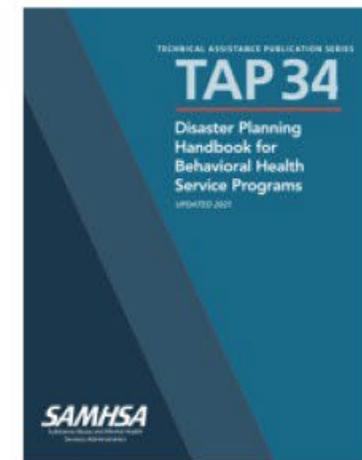
Provides general information about disaster behavioral health and describes activities involved in various stages of the planning . The guide identifies resources that may be helpful in planning and features a checklist with key elements of a disaster behavioral health plan.

<https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dbh-all-hazards-planning-pep24-01-031.pdf>

## SAMSHA Disaster Planning Handbook for Behavioral Health Service Programs

Provides guidance for behavioral health service and substance use disorder treatment programs wanting to develop or update a comprehensive, scalable, and flexible disaster plan. It addresses planning needs specific to programs that offer prevention services, outpatient or residential treatment, medically supervised withdrawal, and pharmacotherapy.

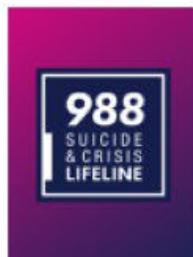
[TAP 34: Disaster Planning Handbook for Behavioral Health Service Programs | SAMHSA Library](#)



# Disaster Behavioral Health Resources



**Disaster Distress Helpline**  
1-800-985-5990 (Call or text)



*There is hope.*



**988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**  
988 (Call, text, or chat)



Get Connected. Get Help.™

**211**  
Community Information and Referral

## **Crisis Counseling Programs**

Awarded after a Presidentially declared emergency with CCP designated services or after the President has issued a major disaster declaration with Individual Assistance designated.

# Disaster Behavioral Health Resources

## Psychological First Aid Training (PFA)

PFA is designed for delivery by mental health and other disaster response workers who provide early assistance to affected children, families, and adults as part of an organized disaster response effort.

<https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/dbhis/psychological-first-aid>

While users must pay to receive a certificate of course completion, they can take the course free of charge without receiving a certificate (though site registration is required).