

H.R. 5703: Post-Disaster Mental Health Response Act

Introduced by Congresswoman Pressley (MA-07), Chairwoman Titus (NV-01),
Congressman McKinley (WV-01), and Congressman Meijer (MI-03)

Endorsed by National Association of EMTs, International Association of Fire Fighters, National Association of Counties, American Psychological Association, National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors, American Mental Wellness Association, Children’s Hospital Association, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), Campaign for Trauma-Informed Policy and Practice, American College of Emergency Physicians, Iowa Primary Care Association, Gundersen Health System, Eating Disorders Coalition for Research, Policy & Action, Center for Advocacy for the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (CARIE), Inseparable, Association of Behavioral Healthcare, Center for Law and Social Policy, National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors, Riverside Community Care, Team Rubicon

Summary: In the last decade alone, there have been more than 4,000 Emergency Declarations in 37 states and 72 percent of all Congressional districts¹. From hurricanes and earthquakes to terrorist attacks and other mass violence, these emergencies have led to lasting trauma for individuals, families, and communities, and significant cost burdens on local governments tasked with rebuilding from these crises.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) already provides technical assistance and reimbursement to states, tribes, and territories to address the mental health impacts in the aftermath of tragedies through its Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP). The CCP provides the guidance, tools, best practices, and funding states need to help people recover from the mental health impacts of disasters. The CCP uses evidence-based, short-term counseling interventions, including establishing emergency phone lines, social media sites, and support groups, educating on the use of coping strategies, and connecting survivors with long-term care.

The Problem: CCP is only available to states, territories, and tribes that have received **only** a Major Disaster Declaration. It is not available for smaller-scale disasters that receive Emergency Declarations.

The Solution: The **Post-Disaster Mental Health Response Act** would simply amend FEMA’s existing Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program so that it applies to Emergency Declarations. This legislation will ensure that disasters that don’t meet the physical or monetary requirements for a Major Disaster can still receive mental health support for impacted communities.

This legislation is responsive to data on the devastating long-term impact of tragedies, including:

- Following the Boston marathon bombing, which received an Emergency Declaration in 2013, 38% of **Boston-area military veterans diagnosed with PTSD were emotionally distressed**, experiencing flashbacks² and **11% of marathon-attending children** exhibited PTSD symptoms³
- Experiencing a **natural disaster** by age 5 is associated with a 16% increase in a mental health or **substance use disorder** by adulthood⁴
- A large-scale study of earthquake survivors found that 24% had PTSD⁵
- **Emergency Medical Response workers** are 1.39 times more likely to **die by suicide**⁶ and **10-20% of firefighters** who have responded to major wildfires experience PTSD.

¹ OpenFEMA Dataset: Disaster Declaration Summaries – v2. Accessed 23 July 2021. <https://www.fema.gov/about/reports-and-data/openfema>

² Miller MW, Wolf EJ, Hein C, Prince L, Reardon AF. Psychological effects of the marathon bombing on Boston-area veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. *J Trauma Stress*. 2013 Dec;26(6):762-6. doi: 10.1002/jts.21865. Epub 2013 Nov 8. PMID: 24343753.

³ Comer JS, Dantowitz A, Chou T, Edson AL, Elkins RM, Kerns C, Brown B, Green JG. Adjustment among area youth after the Boston marathon bombing and subsequent manhunt. *Pediatrics* Jul 2014, 134 (1) 7-14; DOI: 10.1542/peds.2013-4115

⁴ Maclean JC, Popovici I, French MT. (2016). Are natural disasters in early childhood associated with mental health and substance use disorders as an adult? *Social Science & Medicine*. 151: 78-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.01.006>

⁵ Dai W, Chen L, Lai Z, Li Y, Wang J, Liu A. The incidence of post-traumatic stress disorder among survivors after earthquakes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2016;16:188. Published 2016 Jun 7. doi:10.1186/s12888-016-0891-9

⁶ Tiesman HM, Elkins KL, Brown M, Marsh S, Carson LM (2021) Suicides among first responders: a call to action. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2021/04/06/suicides-first-responders/>