

INSIDE LA SPIRIT

Special points of interest:

- Harmony Outreach will host the Provider Leadership meeting Wednesday 9-27-2006 at 10:30 am.
- **Stress Management Positions**
Now hiring Stress Managers and Stress Management Team Leaders for the LA Spirit Hurricane Recovery Program, to provide services for public sector staff. Applicants must be experienced in crisis, disaster and/or mental health counseling, have strong intuitive and people skills, along with common sense and flexibility, and be skilled in group and individual interventions and public speaking. Social services degrees preferred. Contact Margaret Culbertson at mculbert@dhh.la.gov.

Inside this issue:

Cook's Corner	2
The Accordion Man	3
Southwest Region Data	4
Connecting Culture	5
Public Health Region	5
VOA SWLA Children's Team	7
Assessing behavioral health needs	8
Anniversary Events	9

INSIDE



Louisiana Spirit: Touching the lives of others

At the Cameron Parish recovery base camp, Louisiana Spirit met Dorothy, a volunteer firefighter from Grand Chenier.

When members of the Lake Charles First Responder and Stress Management teams met her two months after Rita, she had recently returned from a fire where she suffered a work-related accident (aggravating a previous automobile injury). After falling from a ladder, she was walking with her body at a 45 degree angle. Until others could return to the parish, she was the only local firefighter in the area.

First Encounter: As Peer Support began talk-

ing to her, she was unwilling to seek services. When asked what the teams could do for her, she replied, "Nothing." However, she listened while the counselor spoke to others about services, peer support, and Stress Management. She decided try a table session.

After a session with a Stress Management team member, she came **running** to the Peer Support Crisis Counselor and exclaimed, "What you can do for me is to make sure these people come back!" Prior to her session, she was in so much pain that she needed assistance just to get on a table. After her session, her face was relaxed, she had hope, serenity, and was without pain for the first time in years.

Continued on page 5

Life after Rita: A Shrimper's Story

Tommy and Sherry are lifelong residents of Cameron and have made a living catching and selling shrimp for more than 20 years. Tommy's parents and grandfather were living in Cameron when Hurricane Audrey came ashore in 1957. The family home was washed away and Tommy's grandfather drowned in the storm. Tommy was born one month after Audrey devastated the coast. He began shrimping with his dad at the age of 5 and at the age of 9 had to quit school to devote himself full-time to shrimping to help support the family. As he grew up he learned a multitude of trades besides shrimping including, plumbing, carpentry, electrical work and welding. In 1985 Tommy built his first shrimp boat. He built his second and present boat, a 56 foot long vessel

named "Sherry D", in 1998. He built this boat on his own with scrap timber from a demolished boat wharf and metal sheeting from a demolished building on the Cameron coast. While Tommy supported the family by shrimping, Sherry helped by selling some of Tommy's catch from their small business which was attached to their Cameron home. The couple literally built the family home themselves and used only the most durable materials which could weather any storm- or so they thought. Just prior to Hurricane Rita making landfall, Tommy relocated his shrimp boat closer inland at the LNG plant just south of Lake Charles.

Continued on page 2

COOK'S CORNER Charles Cook, Executive Director LA Spirit



Charles Cook
Executive Director LA Spirit

It has been a year since Hurricane Rita devastated Southwestern Louisiana. Many of the hurricane victims we work with were impacted twice, first trying to accommodate the evacuees from the New Orleans area, then slammed directly by Hurricane Rita. Wonderful people who made up the "Cajun Navy" that saved so many in New Orleans were then subject to the same cruel force of nature that destroyed their own homes and, at least temporarily, a way of life. Though some have called Rita "the forgotten storm," Louisiana Spirit has not forgotten, reaching out in this region from the beginning. And we won't stop now. In fact, with "normalcy" still seemingly out there in the distant future, Louisiana Spirit is needed as much as ever. When energy, resiliency and focus wane, we need to be there to replenish. When frustration and fatigue turn to anger and conflict, we need to be there to offer constructive avenues of expression. When someone

feels forgotten, we need to be there to connect, to witness their story, again and again. We need to be there to support the Spirit, and the way of life that is Louisiana.



Holly Beach, Cameron, LA



The Lake Front, Lake Charles, LA

"Our Louisiana Spirit counselors get the distinct impression that Tommy and Sherry are honored that we listen with intense interest to their story. They have yet to realize that it is we who are honored that they choose to tell us their story."



Louisiana Shrimping Boat

They evacuated as the storm approached and returned only one day after the storm passed to find the area devastated. Fortunately, the boat sustained relatively minor damage. Tommy and Sherry lived on the boat for nearly a month and from time to time would take in other Cameron residents in need.

Tommy and Sherry finally managed to reach the site of their home in Cameron several weeks after Hurricane Rita made landfall. When they came to their home site they found no evidence that a home had ever existed - not a scrap of lumber, not a picture frame... nothing. The sturdy home built by their own hands with only the strongest and most weather resistant materials had vanished.

The decision of whether to return to Cameron to start over after Hurricane Rita was an easy one for Tommy. He was ready to move back in an instant. However, Sherry would have nothing to do with it .She refused to go back to Cameron to live and was ready

to go her own way, if necessary. The couple reached a compromise and purchased a home in Grand Lake where they now live. Their plans are eventually to return to shrimping once the business infrastructure has been restored. For the time being Tommy and Sherry keep very busy with the salvage business they started after the storm. Tommy expects to harvest oysters during the winter. Both Tommy and Sherry continue to refurbish "Sherry D" to be ready for the next shrimping season.

The couple are models of independence, courage and perseverance. They have asked for practically nothing from the government and have taken very little when it was offered. They choose to make it on their own much like the early settlers did when this country was being developed. Our Louisiana Spirit counselors get the distinct impression that Tommy and Sherry are honored that we listen with intense interest to their story. They have yet to realize that it is we who are honored that they choose to tell us their story.



Assisting our friends,
family and neighbors
with recovery back to a
state of normalcy.

The Accordion Man

While visiting a rural area south of Erath (Vermilion Parish), I met a woman and her elderly husband who were severely impacted by Hurricane Rita. Prior to the storm, the couple lived in a modest trailer on family property. They chose to 'ride out' the storm instead of evacuating. The storm surge pushed seven feet of water into the area, and the couple spent twelve hours clinging to an oak tree before being air-lifted to safety. Unfortunately, in the wake of this tragic event, the couple lost almost everything they owned in the floodwaters. When the water receded, they found the carcass of a cow in the doorway of their devastated home.

During my visit I discovered that he was an accomplished accordion player. In fact, one of the very few items the couple managed to salvage was a photograph of him with his accordion. Over the years, he has played at countless house dances, Cajun jam sessions and dance hall shows. Years ago, he held down a weekly band gig on Sundays at a dance hall in Erath. He was full of stories about 'the old days', including an influential visit by Hank Williams, Sr. to Vermilion Parish.

Although retired, and not as active as he once was, he still played everyday at home, along with playing occasionally at jam sessions and at monthly potluck Cultural Association meetings at a local grocery store. On Sundays, he loved to play along to tunes on the radio. He was despondent as he spoke about the loss of his accordion; to him, it was more than a mere instrument.

The couple received some assistance from FEMA, including a temporary trailer, and they are in the process of rebuilding their lives. However, at this point, an accordion is a luxury item that they simply could not afford. I decided to assist him in locating funding, or any other resource that might be available to help purchase a new instrument. Music is so

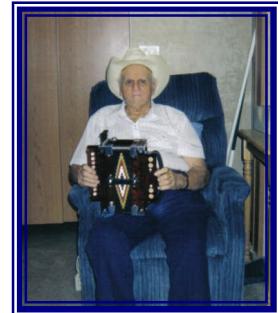
important to him personally, and is a wonderful part of the rich cultural fabric of Acadiana in general. I felt that it was imperative to help restore, even by way of a single musician, this great and unique tradition of south Louisiana.

Over the course of several months, and while assisting the couple with more pressing needs, I tried numerous avenues to find funding, but to no avail. Although the prospect did not look good, he was grateful for my assistance. We agreed to keep trying and applied online with Music Rising, an organization dedicated to replacing lost instruments for musicians along the Gulf Coast. Eventually, this effort came to fruition and I was contacted and informed that the organization would purchase the accordion.

His face lit up on the day that I shared the good news with him, and he grinned from ear to ear. His excitement was contagious as he described to me the instrument that he wanted. The funding was so generous he would be able to obtain a custom-made instrument to his specifications. There are only a handful of accordion-makers left in Acadiana and, even then, certain parts of the instrument must be special-ordered from Italy.

He quickly found a gentleman in Maurice (Vermilion Parish) to take on the project. The instrument should be ready in two weeks time and he is waiting anxiously for it. We both thank the Music Rising organization, and those individuals who generously donated the funds, to make it all possible. He promises to invite me over to listen to him play. I can't wait to hear that familiar sound drift over the crawfish ponds and sugarcane fields once again.

**Story by Craig LeBlanc, VOA Lafayette
Team Leader**



"During my visit I discovered that he was an accomplished accordion player. In fact, one of the very few items the couple managed to salvage was a photograph of him with his accordion."



Louisiana Spirit Crisis Counseling Program Southwest Region Data



Angela Marshall, Data Manager

"Over 54,000 individual crisis counseling sessions were conducted. ."

"Over 48,000 brief contacts have been made."

"Over 30,000 contacts have been made through group counseling, public education and community networking."

"Over 2 million pieces of material have been distributed."

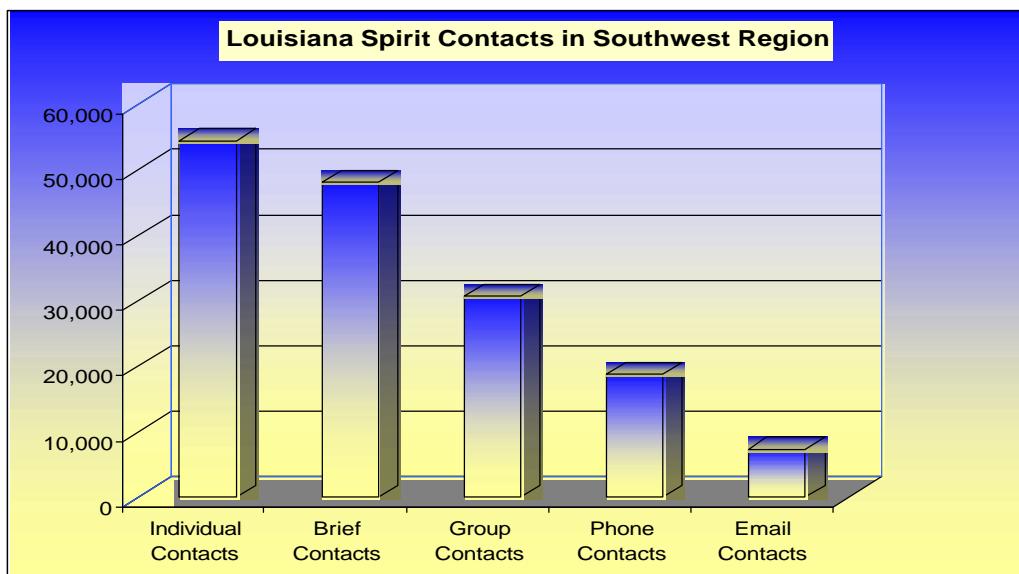


The Louisiana Spirit Crisis Counseling Program has made over 133,000 in-person contacts, over 26,000 phone or email contacts, and over 2 million materials have been distributed. The data reported in this article reflect data collected from Service Area 5 which includes the parishes of: Acadia, Calcasieu, Cameron, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, St. Martin, and Vermilion. The data in this article reflect totals from all the providers from September 2005- July 2006. The Louisiana Spirit Program collects the following types of data:

- Individual Crisis Counseling
- Group Crisis Counseling
- Public Education
- Brief Crisis Counseling
- Telephone Contacts
- E-mail Contacts
- Materials Handed Out
- Materials mailed to homes
- Materials left in public places
- Community networking and coalition building

Over 54,000 individual crisis counseling sessions were conducted. An individual crisis counseling sessions is defined as contact where the discussion goes beyond education and assists the person to understand their current situation and reactions, review their options, and address their emotional support or referral needs. These sessions last 15 minutes or greater. Over 48,000 brief contacts have been made. Brief contacts are defined as contacts with individuals that were less than 15 minutes and did not result in an in-depth discussion or interaction of an educational or crisis counseling nature.

Over 30,000 contacts have been made through group counseling, public education and community networking. Group counseling refers to those services that help group members understand their current situation and reactions to the disaster, review or discuss their options, provide emotional support or referral services, and/or provide skills to cope with their current situation and reactions. It is similar to individual crisis counseling, but involves 2 or more people. Public Education includes public speaking at community forums and local community meetings. Over 2 million pieces of material have been distributed.



Connecting to Culture

Finding connections to culture enables outreach workers opportunities for successful encounters. In Louisiana, connections can be found through church, family, music and food or in this case, coffee. Volunteers of America of Lafayette- Vermillion Parish team have found common ground through church and coffee. The Vermillion Parish team partners with VISTA to conduct what they "Coffee Break." VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) works with Louisiana Spirit through collaboration with the Diocese of Lafayette. For the last five months, "Coffee Break" has been a place for storm survivors to talk about the storm and for emotional support. The group meets every two weeks to talk while enjoying coffee, tea and snacks. Regulars to the session have expressed gratitude towards Louisiana Spirit for the emotional support.

A large number of the community members are elderly. This community was impacted by a storm surge that traveled 14-miles inland, and left six to eight feet of water in their homes. "The survivors told the team that they were rescued off of their roofs by helicopters and boats," said Vermillion Parish team leader Craig Leblanc. "They were then taken by bus to Houston." Many of those doing rescues by boat were from the affected community.

"The anniversary of Hurricane Rita is a hump that residents are trying to get over," said Leblanc. "They want to get over the anxiety and stress of losing nearly everything they had. Residents are hopeful that the Road Home program covers their needs."

"Coffee Break" started in Erath and has expanded to other parishes around Acadiana.

Louisiana Spirit: Touching the lives of others (continued from page 1)

Over the subsequent weeks, as Peer Support Counselors met with her to address personal issues, it was apparent that she was becoming increasingly self-sufficient. She would smile, laugh, and come for return sessions. Peer Support continued to meet with her and assisted in coping with stress, and problem solving, while providing a temporary support system for emotional release.

At last contact, Dorothy was working at a local diner (the first paying job she has held in five years) and looked like a totally different woman. She continues to be calm, happy, relaxed, and can see hope for the future, although she still lives in a camper or tent on her land. She has become a leader of her community and is hardly recognizable as the same lady the Louisiana Spirit team members first met.



Options for Independence



"Their community was impacted by a storm surge that traveled 14-miles inland, and left six to eight feet of water in their homes."



Public Health Services in Region 5: One year after Rita



One month after the Office of Public Health Region 5 willingly expanded their services to meet the needs of Hurricane Katrina survivors, Hurricane Rita hit their service area. Their office, run by Dr. Bertrand Foch, was faced with the challenge of serving people they regularly served, survivors of Katrina and Rita, as well as tending to their own losses.

Before Katrina forced thousands of survivors to local shelters in the Region 5 service area, the staff were dealing with staff reductions that had taken place in their offices. After the arrival of the Katrina survivors to the local area, their staff had to juggle administering services in the shelters and public health services to the community, while adjusting to a reduced amount of staff. A month later, Rita forced residents to evacuate the area due to the projected area of landfall. Cameron Parish, which sits on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, was hit heavily, causing severe damage to the local Office of Public Health's office. The staff in the Cameron area not only lost their work place, but many lost nearly everything they had. Their staff has only been able to deliver field clinics for immunizations and WIC services to the Cameron area.

The population in the region rose after the storms, creating a larger community to serve. Aside from the damage in Cameron Parish, OPH Region 5 received damage to a clinic that was part of their regional office. The building

was used twice a month for audiology and high risk patients and currently, it is in its final stages of repair.

The Cameron Parish public health unit was built on a four-foot mound, but the area received nine feet of water. Since the destruction of Hurricane Rita, OPH Region 5 has put together a task force to ensure that there is a check list for facility preparation and a check list of the actions needed to be taken in order to minimize their losses in an event of a storm. They also have fine tuned their emergency preparedness plan and identified the employees that would have to stay through the hurricane as well as those who would have to return right after the storm passes.

Louisiana Spirit has worked with OPH region 5 since October 2005 gathering information for the health units, contacts and brochures. "I attend several community meetings and the Louisiana Spirit team was present and everyone knows who they are," said Kellye Anderson Part C. Coordinator OPH Region 5. "They came to our office and conducted stress relief sessions."

"After the arrival of the Katrina survivors to the local area their staff had to juggle administering services in the shelters and public health services to the community, while adjusting to a reduced amount of staff."



Region 5 is represented in red.

Louisiana Spirit VOA Southwest LA Children's Team

Volunteers of America of Southwest Louisiana (VOA SWLA) have been supporting the emotional needs of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita survivors since September 2005. Stabilizing the emotions of kids following the hurricanes has been a major priority for the VOA SWLA children's team. "If parents have a sense of hopelessness and despair, it's sometimes difficult for them to recognize their children's needs," said Elizabeth Barnett, PhD, associate professor of epidemiology at University of South Florida. "If we don't help parents cope with mental trauma following a disaster, they won't be able to help their children." By helping children, the VOA SWLA children's team helps parents who are dealing with the traumatic event themselves. The programs that they conduct focus on children's feelings and experiences regarding the hurricanes. They use games to teach stress management and each of their sessions is child-led and interactive. The children's team also uses arts and crafts activities related to stress management. The team spends time discussing conflict resolution, as many children are still in FEMA trailers and in homes with extended family members.

Over the summer, the team provided licensed counselors to assist staff and campers at four local Camp Noah programs held in Region 5. They have conducted one-time group sessions

for the Cub Scouts of Lake Charles; DeRidder; and Leesville, Girl Scouts of Sulphur, and also at the Goosport Recreation Center in North Lake Charles. The team's ongoing group education and counseling sessions are provided at the following locations: Grand Lake Recreation Center Summer Program, Cameron Parish; Foreman-Reynaud Community Center Day Camp, North Lake Charles; University Recreation Center Day Camp, South Lake Charles; and Drew Park Recreation Center Day Camp, Lake Charles.

To the delight of VOA SWLA children's team, they learned that they can outreach in local schools and the FEMA trailer park. "We are glad to hear that we can go into Crying Eagle (FEMA trailer park)" said VOA SWLA children's team leader Carol Clement. After a long process, we can expand our work to those children and families in need. Groups that begin this month include: Crying Eagle; Grand Lake Recreation Center, Cameron Parish; Barbe Elementary, Lake Charles; Clifton Elementary, Lake Charles; Combre-Fondel Elementary, North Lake Charles; Kennedy Elementary, Lake Charles; Wade Elementary, Jennings.



"If parents have a sense of hopelessness and despair, it's sometimes difficult for them to recognize their children's needs," said Elizabeth Barnett, PhD, associate professor of epidemiology at University of South Florida. "If we don't help parents cope with mental trauma following a disaster, they won't be able to help their



Assessing behavioral health needs

When we think of our needs after a traumatic event we tend to forget about the needs of those who served us. First Responders are on the front line of every emergency that comes upon our nation. For the moment, they put aside their losses and tend to the needs of the public. A report written by the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) assessed the behavioral health needs for Fire Fighters in the Southern Region of Louisiana after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

During the week of June 12th, 2006, three teams were deployed around the Southern Region of our state to assess the status and wellbeing of professional and volunteer fire fighters. In coordination with Louisiana Spirit, they found that most of the fire fighters who had been involved with saving lives and property suffered personal losses as well. The reports states that the three IAFF teams contacted and surveyed fire departments in Calcasieu, Cameron, Jefferson Davis, Vermillion, Iberia, St. Mary, Terrebone, and Lafourche parishes. Each visit was preceded by contact with the respective fire chief for the specific department and followed by visits to the stations to interview fire crews. The IAFF based their approach of interviews on previous disaster work where fire fighters were generally more open to discuss concerns with other fire fighters in informal settings. This method opened up by having semi-structured crew interviews. Teams not only met with groups,

but conducted individual assessments as the opportunity presented itself. Teams enhanced the information collection process by spending the night with crews in the stations they visited.

According to the report, the counseling services are limited and would be welcomed in these parishes. One expanded community stated that eight departments in their region rely on one behavioral health provider for acute care needs and that they have no peer support systems. Crewmembers specifically requested the addition of peer teams from within their own ranks to assist with acute and emergent health care needs. The lack of behavioral health resources has further encumbered the recovery from the acute stress of responding to the storms. Most of the fire fighters interviewed were not aware of the behavioral health care services that are available to them and their families. Louisiana Spirit has first responder teams in every region of the state. The teams work hand and hand with Counseling Services Unit (CSU), a peer based, peer oriented and peer driven organization that works to meet the needs of fire fighters and EMS. Peer support can be reached at 800-273-talk.

The International Association of Fire Fighters complied this information for the report and released it to the public on July 21, 2006.



"Homeowners are eligible for the total amount of damages to the house-on top of any insurance and FEMA repair payments- up to a total level of assistance not to exceed \$150,000. You may also be eligible for grants to help prevent similar damages in the future."



Hurricane Rita Anniversary Events

September 23rd
Cattle Drive
9am -2pm
Corner of Jimmy Savoie and Trosclair Rd
End at Recreation Center in Cameroon

Sept. 22 — A 6 p.m. Interfaith Service at Mount Calvary Baptist Church, 300 North Blake St., with the Rev. Henry Mancuso officiating. Gov. Kathleen Blanco is expected to speak to the congregation. The service is sponsored by the Organization of Louisiana Home and Foreign Mission Baptist State Convention and the B.J. Maxon Church Resource Center.

September 23rd
7:00 pm
“Celebration of Community on Anniversary of Rita”
Abbeville United Methodist Church 213 N. State St.

September 23rd
8-9:30 Interfaith Service
Civic Center
900 Lakeshore Dr
Lake Charles, LA 70601
337.433.3632
"Rita devastation" fly-over will be at 9:35 a.m.

A summit titled "Recovery and Reconstruction of America's Energy Coast" will be 1:30-5 p.m. in the Civic Center's Buccaneer Room.

A community party will be 3-7 p.m. at Sha Sha's restaurant on La. 27 in Creole. The local band Steel Shot will perform.

From Remembrance to Hope

Louisiana Spirit will be very involved in this emotional service, which includes a Smudging Ceremony, purification of worship space and cleansing of memories, a Unity Ceremony featuring waters from each bayou poured into a common bowl, and a viewing of "Doors of Opportunity" which were saved from the shelters and signed by displaced families. Sylvia Young, LA Spirit River Parishes, will give a three minute commemoration on those affected by Hurricane Katrina. She will ask for a moment of silence for "those whose lives were changed by the storm and for hundreds of people who are missing". Louisiana Spirit employees will distribute 500 candles for the candlelight walk from the Courthouse to Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales, 500 Goode St, Houma, LA. Louisiana Spirit will also be involved in the reception following the service with an educational display and refreshments.

September 24th
5:00 pm
“Service of Wholeness and Healing”
First Presbyterian Church of Lake Charles

Sunday, Sept. 24: One Stop Shopping, Lake Charles, LA
Lake Charles Civic Center. Meet with officials from FEMA, the Road Home Program and the Red Cross to answer any questions. From 10 a.m to 2 p.m. Free and open to the public.

September 24th
Discuss the Recovery of America's Energy Coast
2:00pm-5:00pm
The Buccaneer Room, The Lake Charles Civic Center



2751 Wooddale Blvd.
Ste. 2779
Baton Rouge, LA 70805
Telephone (225) 922-3251
Fax (225) 922-3252

Visit us on the web.
LouisianaSpirit.org

Contributors to this issue include:

Danny Adams
Ricky Armelin
Mike Price, Team Leader VOA
SWLA
Carol Clement, Team Leader VOA
SWLA
Charlie Cook
Margaret Culbertson
Paul Godeaux
Craig LeBlanc, VOA Lafayette
Team Leader
Angela Marshall
Moremi Singleton
Dr. Anthony Speier
Office of Public Health Region 5
International Association of Fire
Fighters



Keeping the spirit of
Louisiana alive!

This public document was produced and photocopied in-house by the Department of Health and Hospitals at a total cost of approximately \$50.00. For this edition, 50 copies of this document were copied. This document was published by the Bureau of Media and Communications, Department of Health and Hospitals, 628 North 4th Street, Baton Rouge, LA, 70802 to inform DHH executive staff. This material was photocopied in accordance with the standards for printing by state agencies established pursuant to R.S. 43:31 (B) 1.

Louisiana Spirit Headquarters Staff

Danny Adams, First Responders Peer Support	dadams@dhh.la.gov
Ricky Armelin, Data Analyst	rarmelin@dhh.la.gov
Valerie Branch, Priority Populations	vbranch@dhh.la.gov
Gilda Butler, Deputy Director of External Operations	gabutler@dhh.la.gov
Charlie Cook, Executive Director	Ccook@dhh.la.gov
Margaret Culbertson, Stress Management Coordinator	mculbert@dhh.la.gov
John Daniel, Deputy Director for Internal Operations	jdaniel@dhh.la.gov
Jennifer Farlough, Administrative Assistant	JFarlough@dhh.la.gov
Jill Farr, Administrative Assistant	jfar@dhb.la.gov
Almarie Ford, OMH Cultural Competence Officer	alford@dhh.la.gov
Lauren Guttzeit, Training Coordinator	lguttzei@dhh.la.gov
Bernetta Guy, Data Analyst	bguy@dhh.la.gov
Nicole Harrell, Fiscal Analyst	nharrell@dhh.la.gov
Danita LeBlanc, Child/Youth Crisis Services Coordinator	DLeblanc2@dhh.la.gov
Angela Marshall, Data Manager	amarshal@dhh.la.gov
Kami McDonald, Public Information Officer	kmcdonald@dhh.la.gov
Moremi Singleton, Cultural Competence Liaison	msingleton@dhh.la.gov
Dr. Tony Speier, Director, Disaster MH Operations	aspeier@dhh.la.gov
Renea Thomas, Historian and Volunteer Coordinator	rthomas1@dhh.la.gov
Tanya Williams, Data Analyst	twillia5@dhh.la.gov

Wellness tips : health benefits of laughter

Research has shown both physical and emotional benefits of laughter, ranging from strengthening the immune system, managing depression and anxiety, improving heart functioning and coping with pain in chronic illness. There's even an emerging therapeutic field known as humor therapy to help people heal more quickly, among other things. Laughter isn't a cure-all but it does have many stress relieving benefits:

Hormones: Laughter reduces the level of at least four stress hormones, increases the level of health-enhancing hormones, and increases the number of antibody-producing cells.

Internal workout and muscle relaxation: A good belly laugh exercises the diaphragm, contracts the abs and works out the shoulders, leaving muscles more relaxed.

Cardiac exercise: After a good belly laugh, your heart races, even after 15-20 seconds of laughter and stays elevated for 3-5 minutes. Laughter has been referred to as "internal jogging". It may help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by increasing blood flow.

Distraction: Laughter draws attention away from the source of the distress (pain, anger, guilt, stress, etc.) – at least briefly.

Perspective: Studies show that our response to stressful events can be altered by whether we view something as a "threat" or a "challenge". Humor can give us a more lighthearted perspective and help us view events as challenging rather than threatening.

Social benefits: Laughter connects us with others – and it is contagious. So if you laugh more, you can help others around you to laugh more, and all will experience the benefits. You can improve the quality of social interaction in your workplace and in your family by laughing!

A recent study showed that pre-school aged children laugh up to 400 times a day, but adults laugh only 17 times a day on average. How can we get more laughter in our lives?

Watching sitcoms or comedy videos is an easy way. Getting together with friends for fun usually involves some laughter. Or consider joining a Laughter Club. Begun 10 years ago by a physician in India, these non-profit groups claim more than 5000 circles world wide. Groups gather for silly child's play, laughter and yogic breathing techniques that proponent say reduces stress and helps control high blood pressure, heart disease, depression and anxiety (no joke!).