

Tabletop Exercise with Behavioral Health Partners

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During a disaster how are behavioral and mental health agencies integrated into the community response? This question was at the genesis of a recent tabletop exercise involving several behavioral/mental health agency partners serving communities on the western end of the Upper Peninsula. The exercise was part of a larger effort to provide disaster preparedness assistance to agencies and facilities that serve a vulnerable population of Michiganders. The goal of this effort is to help increase each agency's capacity to provide continuous support for their clients during natural or man-made disasters.

The scenario for this exercise was weather related; a straight-lined wind storm caused significant damage to agency owned properties and local utilities. The scenario was designed to specifically test incident command decision-making, emergency communication and coordination, and agency emergency operating guidelines. Approximately 20 people participated from Houghton, Baraga, Ontonagon, and Gogebic counties.



The exercise helped to identify several important lessons learned:

- Redundant emergency communication must be developed. Every phase of the implementation of the emergency operations guidelines relied on phone communication; either cellular or landline. During the scenario the landline communication link between agency facilities was interrupted. In addition, given the community-wide nature of the simulated incident, cellular phone capabilities were overwhelmed.
- Clear incident command coordination is essential. The agencies involved in the exercises had limited familiarity with FEMA's National Incident Management System or Incident Command Structure. While the terms and forms were foreign, they could clearly articulate the command structure and organizational structure they would utilize during an incident. A review of the basic principles behind the development of an Incident Action Plan was provided as a means for maintaining situational awareness and tracking the effectiveness of incident response efforts.
- External collaboration is essential. At several points during the exercise the agencies involved encountered obstacles that were beyond their internal response capabilities. These obstacles provided perfect illustrations of the importance of developing and maintaining external partnerships with those involved in emergency response and preparedness in their community. The role and capabilities of county emergency management, the regional healthcare coalition, and local public health agency were

discussed. In addition, the value of pre-incident planning with local first responders and fire departments was recognized and affirmed.

By the end of the tabletop the agencies involved had developed tangible steps to improving their emergency preparedness. The Region 8 Healthcare Coalition plans to provide assistance with training and additional exercises that will build on this initial progress and each agency plans to contact their county emergency manager, local health department, and first response agencies to explore opportunities for emergency collaboration.

These important steps will improve the service and support they provide to the vulnerable population they serve in each of our communities.