



UCLA Center for Public Health and Disasters

1145 Gayley Avenue, Suite 304
Los Angeles, CA 90024

Phone: (310) 794-0864
Fax: (310) 794-0889
E-mail: cphdr@ucla.edu
www.cphd.ucla.edu

PsySTART Rapid Mental Health Triage and Incident Management System

PsySTART is a rapid mental health triage and incident management strategy for large-scale disaster and terrorism events. PsySTART (or Psychological Simple Triage and Rapid Treatment) is the first known, evidence-based, disaster mental health triage tag used to rapidly assess and provide for the surge of acute and longer-term mental health impacts following disasters. Many organizations around the country have adopted PsySTART, including the American Red Cross, Los Angeles County Emergency Medical Services Agency and Disaster Resource Center Hospitals in Los Angeles County. It has been identified as a recommended strategy in the behavioral health guidelines of the National Disaster Medical System. It is a component of a novel approach to children's mental health needs in disasters that was identified by FEMA as a "model emergency management practice".

PsySTART includes three components: 1) A theoretical framework of linkage between "disaster systems of care", 2) An evidence-based rapid triage tag designed for field use, and 3) An information technology platform that manages the collection and analysis of triage needs in near real time. When aggregated across multiple service sites in a jurisdiction, it can be used for prioritization of services and provides a "common operating picture" and real time situational awareness. This awareness allows for the development of local mental health incident action plans (IAPs) and requests for mutual aid, and helps local communities integrate mental health response across "disaster systems of care". Rapid mental health triage is critical because just as in emergency medicine where there is the "golden hour" to get care, in disaster mental health, there is increasing evidence of a "golden month" for the high risk subset to be matched to brief, evidence-based care.

PsySTART provides for near real time situational awareness of "at risk" individuals and linkage to follow on care. In a surge environment of many "at risk" individuals, the PsySTART system uses a "floating triage algorithm" for prioritization of individuals that need be seen first, who needs to be seen next and who can be referred later for further assessment beyond the initial surge setting. This allows for coordination of disaster mental health needs across organizations to better manage an incident, allocate limited acute phase psychological resources and prioritize mutual aid needs based on a common evidence-based metric.

For more information, please contact Dr. Merritt Schreiber, Senior Manager, Psychological Programs, UCLA Center for Public Health and Disasters, 310-794-0864 or mschreiber@mednet.ucla.edu.

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