New Jersey has made tremendous progress recovering after Superstorm Sandy. Many of our communities have been rebuilt and are thriving. However, the effects of the storm are long lasting, and impacted families and individuals continue to face challenges. The Department of Health’s recovery plan has focused on increasing awareness and providing resources for social and medical support and environmental health impacts resulting from Sandy. Our agency has been working closely with our sister agencies—the Departments of Human Services and Children and Families—on a comprehensive approach. As healthcare providers, you have an opportunity to support these efforts by identifying those experiencing health effects related to the storm and ensuring their needs are addressed.

ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL STRESS

The stress of a major cleanup and the financial losses and additional expenses incurred as a result of the storm are daunting. Stress disables people, exacerbates disease, precipitates behavioral health issues, leads to substance abuse and negatively affects relationships and families. The psychological effects can also negatively impact an individual’s overall health and well-being.

Studies have demonstrated that problems coping with stress and trauma—such as mental health issues, household discord, substance abuse and domestic violence—increase following disasters. After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans households were more likely to break up than similar U.S. households during the same period. There is also evidence that child abuse may increase following a natural disaster. In the six-month period after Hurricane Floyd hit North Carolina, there was a fivefold increase in the rate of inflicted traumatic brain injury in children under two years of age in counties severely affected by the hurricane. Counties that were less affected or not affected at all did not experience an increase.

It is important for healthcare practitioners to be watchful for possible signs and symptoms of the physical, emotional and psychological stress that patients may be experiencing due to the prolonged, continuing stresses posed by the storm. Patients suffering from the
emotional impact of Sandy can be referred to a New Jersey program intended to ensure that those affected by stress have help during this difficult time. The Hope and Healing program offers confidential mental health information and referrals at 877-294-HELP (4357) (TTY: 877-294-4356). The phones are answered by trained counselors who can assist anyone experiencing anxiety or depression. Crisis counselors have been canvassing the state since Sandy, meeting with survivors in their neighborhoods, town halls, churches and anywhere else that people need help dealing with the damage that goes beyond bricks and mortar. As counselors meet with residents, they have found that many are dealing with feelings of anxiety, fearfulness and sadness. In addition, common physical effects are fatigue and exhaustion. More than 200,000 residents have been provided information or counseling by Hope and Healing staff to date.

Recognizing Environmental Health Issues

As part of the state’s recovery efforts, the Department of Health has been working to prevent and mitigate post-storm environmental health problems so these issues do not cause additional or new challenges to already impacted residents. Individuals and families are at risk from environmental health threats such as mold, lead and asbestos as communities repair and rebuild damaged residences and businesses. For example, after communities were renovated and rebuilt following Hurricane Katrina, increased lead levels were found in soil, posing a potential new lead exposure source and a potential health hazard for children. Given that many New Jersey communities are now in this rebuilding phase, it is imperative that healthcare providers renew their focus on screening children in affected counties. New Jersey has a universal screening law that requires all children to be tested for lead poisoning at age 1 and age 2 or at least once by age 6. Early diagnosis is critical—it allows children to get early treatment so serious health and learning consequences can be avoided.

Another lesson learned from past hurricanes was that many people working to repair their homes weren’t taking proper precautions to ensure their safety. Following Hurricane Katrina, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention investigated the extent of mold damage in several areas of Louisiana. This examination determined that 46 percent of inspected homes had visible mold growth, and residents and remediation workers did not consistently use appropriate respiratory protection. To protect against injury while rebuilding, the Department launched a public awareness campaign that includes radio public service announcements, op-ed articles and educational flyers. The campaign message encouraged people working on recovery efforts to protect their health by getting a tetanus booster and by wearing goggles, rubber gloves, boots and a respirator. Without taking these precautions, residents can harm themselves or exacerbate preexisting health conditions such as asthma.

To further educate residents, the Department published a pamphlet that provides guidelines to residents on how to assess mold and hire contractors to remove mold. More than 13,000 copies in English and Spanish have been distributed to residents. Additionally, with financial support from the Department, the Rutgers School of Public Health is providing free training classes for home and business owners and volunteers. More than 340 residents have participated in these classes that have been held throughout the state.

**Did you know…**

MDAdvantage® is an advocate for all New Jersey physicians.

That’s value beyond insurance.
There are also classes targeted to public health and building code officials; more than 520 public officials have already participated in these classes. The brochure and information on training classes are available on the Department’s Sandy Recovery Resources website at nj.gov/health/er/hurricane_recovery_resources.shtml.

In addition, an increase in mosquito-borne illness such as West Nile Virus cases is another environmental health issue that concerns the New Jersey Department of Health. After Hurricane Katrina, affected parishes in Louisiana experienced an increase in the number of West Nile neuroinvasive disease (WNND) cases from an average annual number of 30 cases in 2002–2005 to 45 cases in 2006—despite losses in population following the storm. In the affected counties of Mississippi, WNND cases increased from an annual number of 23 cases in 2002–2005 to 55 cases in 2006.5

The Department has launched a West Nile Virus public education campaign that includes radio public service announcements and advertising on NJ Transit trains and buses to ensure residents know how to protect themselves. In 2012, the year after Hurricane Irene, New Jersey had a record number of cases of West Nile Virus—with 48 human cases, including six deaths. Superstorm Sandy created new places for mosquitos to breed such as wet debris piles and depressions left by fallen trees—potentially putting New Jersey at risk for another challenging season. We can reduce the risk of the disease by reminding the public that they should wear insect repellent, repair screens, dispose of debris and remove standing water on their property. More information for residents on West Nile Virus can be found at nj.gov/health/cd/westnile/index.shtml.

Joining Together to Increase Awareness

There are serious health concerns that occur during the disaster recovery period. It is up to healthcare and public health professionals to recognize how people are affected by disasters and to refer them to appropriate resources for help. I am asking healthcare partners throughout the state to join the New Jersey Department of Health to increase awareness of the health hazards that residents continue to face. Healthcare providers have the ability to assess patients and refer those who are having difficulty to medical and behavioral health resources. Recovering after one of the most devastating storms to ever strike our state can be overwhelming; however, by partnering with healthcare providers, we can all ensure more residents have the resources they need to better address the physical, emotional and environmental impact of Superstorm Sandy.

Mary E. O’Dowd, MPH, is the Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health.


