

ANNEX M
Behavioral Health
Operations

Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan
SEPTEMBER 2026

Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization and County of San Diego

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ANNEX M – TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
GENERAL.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PURPOSE	1
SCOPE	1
Whole Community Approach.....	1
CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS	2
OPERATIONS CENTERS AND ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES.....	2
OPERATIONS CENTERS.....	2
City Emergency Operations Center (EOC).....	2
Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (OA EOC)	3
LEADERSHIP	3
County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Director.....	3
County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Disaster Coordinator.....	3
ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES	3
Behavioral Health Services (Director or Designee).....	3
Behavioral Health Services Executive Team (Directors, Assistant Director and Chief Operations Officer, Deputy Directors, Hospital Administrators, Clinical Directors)	4
Behavioral Health Services Disaster Coordinator	4
Behavioral Health Services Disaster Response Team and Site Leads	5
Administrative Services Organization (ASO) Telephone Access and Crisis Line (ACL).....	6
All County of San Diego, Behavioral Health Services Programs.....	6
Hospital Administrators - San Diego County Psychiatric Hospital and Edgemoor Distinct Part Skilled Nursing Facility.....	6
County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Staff.....	6
Behavioral Health Services Response.....	7
DIRECTION, CONTROL, OR COORDINATION	7
PLAN ACTIVATION AND TERMINATION.....	7
DIRECTION OF RESPONSE	8
COORDINATION	8
INFORMATION COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION	8
INFORMATION AND EDUCATION.....	8
COMMUNICATIONS.....	9
ADMINISTRATION, FINANCE, AND LOGISTICS.....	9
ANNEX DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE.....	9
AUTHORITIES AND REFERENCES	10
ATTACHMENT 1 – BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DISASTER OPERATIONS	11

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This annex describes the role of the Behavioral Health Services Department. County Behavioral Health has a role in the field and at the Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (OA EOC). Many of their providers are trained to assist both disaster workers and people in shelters, who have lost their homes and possessions.

GENERAL

INTRODUCTION

The Behavioral Health Annex to the San Diego County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan (OA EOP) describes the basic concepts, policies, and procedures for providing a coordinated behavioral health response to any disaster. This annex serves as the unifying behavioral health document for the County of San Diego and the cities of the OA, as authorized by the Emergency Services Agreement.

PURPOSE

To establish a behavioral health disaster response system and define responsibilities and actions that will facilitate effective use of behavioral health resources during a disaster.

SCOPE

Behavioral Health Services (BHS) are provided to mitigate the effects of acute and long-term threats to the mental health of the population and to maintain the mental health and safety of responders. Services may include crisis counseling and psychological first aid, and other services to relieve mental health and/or substance abuse problems caused or aggravated by a disaster or its aftermath.

Whole Community Approach

The San Diego Operational Area is committed to achieving and fostering an emergency management system that uses a Whole Community Approach and is fully inclusive of individual needs and circumstances. For further details on Whole Community Approach to emergency management and the integration of inclusive emergency management practices, refer to the Basic Plan.

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

BHS responds to requests to initiate emergency responses as provided by the County Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), as the Director of Emergency Services for the unincorporated area or the Coordinator of Emergency Services for the OA, or a designated representative. In response to direction to activate, BHS will provide staff to respond to hazards commensurate to the level of the disaster.

BHS assesses the continuity of services, provided by both County-operated programs and by BHS contractors. BHS programs are prepared to continue services according to the BHS Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP). Other related plans to be utilized for BHS incidents include a Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) BHS Response plan, medical points of distribution (M-PODS) plan, and the Mental Health Recovery plan.

BHS is prepared to dispatch staff to Local Assistance Centers (LACs) or other sites that support the community. All County staff are designated as disaster service workers (DSW) and can be called upon to respond outside of normal duties during emergencies. In addition, designated contract service providers will appoint staff to respond as DSWs. Staff at LACs or other sites will conduct outreach among disaster victims and first responders and provide counseling services upon request.



OPERATIONS CENTERS AND ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

The Office of Emergency Services (OES) is key to successful response and recovery operations. With centralized decision making, personnel and other resources can be more effectively utilized. The OA EOC Director ensures all tasks are accomplished with little or no duplication of effort and with highest probability of success.

OPERATIONS CENTERS

City Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

Each City has a central facility designated as an EOC. From the EOC, disaster operations are directed or coordinated. When the EOC is activated, it is staffed by city employees from departments with emergency responsibilities, as well as liaison representatives from other agencies and jurisdictions. In each city, the Mayor, City Manager, or their designee is designated as Director of Emergency Services, by ordinance, and directs or delegate emergency operations from the EOC.

Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (OA EOC)

The OA EOC serves the same function as a City's EOC. The OA EOC has the additional responsibilities of coordinating response activities throughout the entire OA including the unincorporated area. The CAO serves as the Director of the Emergency Services for the unincorporated areas and as Coordinator of Emergency Services for the entire OA.

The OA EOC is located at the County Operations Center in Kearny Mesa and is used as the central point for resource acquisition and allocation, as well as coordination. The Behavioral Health section of the OA EOC ([Attachment 1](#)) is normally activated when the OA EOC is fully activated at a Level 1 (Highest Level). It is staffed by pre-designated behavioral health personnel who coordinate, plan, and evaluate the behavioral health response for the OA. The OA EOC behavioral health staff serve as advisors to the Director/Coordinator of Emergency Services and make decisions about resource allocation, priorities, and other behavioral health matters.

LEADERSHIP

County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Director

Reports to the CAO and is responsible for all long-range logistics planning and policy decisions for behavioral health services within the County. The director is assisted by the BHS Assistant Director and Chief Operations Officer.

County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Disaster Coordinator

Reports to the Assistant Director and Chief Operations Officer of BHS and is primarily responsible for coordinating the provision of behavioral health services in the county. The BHS Disaster Coordinator and designated administrative staff determine the need for behavioral health services and coordinate resource allocation. Additionally, the BHS Disaster Coordinator works closely with medical, health, care and shelter operations, the Administrative Services Officer, other counties, community organizations and volunteers to coordinate activities.

ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

Behavioral Health Services (Director or Designee)

- Responsible for updating this Behavioral Health Annex and other emergency behavioral health plans and procedures, as needed.
- Coordinates, plans, and evaluates behavioral health disaster operations within the County.
- Coordinates the procurement and allocation of behavioral health resources required to support disaster operations.
- Identifies behavioral health resources within the County.
- Coordinates all County-operated and contracted behavioral health-related activities among other local and private response agencies or groups, as well as state and federal agencies.
- Coordinates requests and responses to requests with Cal OES Region VI Disaster Medical Coordinator via County EMS.
- Reports to the OA EOC or sends a representative.
- Designates BHS Disaster Coordinator.

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- Coordinates with jurisdiction Public Information Officer (PIO) for the issuance of appropriate behavioral health messages.

Behavioral Health Services Executive Team (Directors, Assistant Director and Chief Operations Officer, Deputy Directors, Hospital Administrators, Clinical Directors)

- Upon notification that a disaster has occurred, the BHS Disaster Coordinator and disaster response leads meet with the Behavioral Health Services Director to plan appropriate next steps.
- Clinical Director advises and consults on clinical issues related to the disaster.

Behavioral Health Services Disaster Coordinator

- Responsible, under the authority of the BHS Director, for the overall coordination and implementation of this annex. Coordinates behavioral health related activities among local public and private response agencies or groups with designated administrative staff.
- Establishes pre-disaster response relationships with other agencies such as American Red Cross (ARC), law enforcement, law enforcement crisis counseling staff, fire departments, San Diego Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD), psychological and psychiatric associations, and other community partners including members of the Health Care Association.
- Disseminates printed information on psychological impacts of a disaster and referral resources.
- Participates in disaster exercises.
- Works with Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) to register licensed Behavioral Health Workers, if requested.
- Works with the Administrative Services Officer and Access and Crisis Line (ACL) to support staffing of emergency referral services that support behavioral health disaster operations. The ACL refers callers to 2-1-1 San Diego for community resources beyond behavioral health needs, such as food, housing, or utility assistance.
- Develops and maintains an inventory of all available trained staff and supplies.
- Develops a network of behavioral health workers to include County staff and staff from other agencies, and private practitioners. These behavioral health workers will work with behavioral health staff in planning and providing behavioral health outreach services during and after a disaster in the field or in shelters. Creates and maintains roster of Behavioral Health personnel.
- Develops and coordinates disaster activities such as data collection for behavioral health disaster relief funding, outreach, and follow-up programs.
- Assures briefings and debriefings of response team(s) occur.
- Prepares Behavioral Health post-disaster summary report to include an evaluation of behavioral health activities and recommendations.
- Maintains list of County Behavioral Health alternate work sites.
- Maintains linkage with the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) – Mental Health Services Division (MHSD), Disaster Coordinator.
- Establishes a field response, if requested.
- Assigns staff to an assistance center if requested.

- Takes necessary steps to meet communication needs for next of kin notification as requested.



Decorative Image

Behavioral Health Services Disaster Response Team and Site Leads

BHS will provide a BHS Disaster Response Team comprised of County and contracted staff who have been trained in disaster response. Team membership may fluctuate due to staff availability. In addition, a Site Lead will be established at each LAC or other County-designated assistance site. Site leads will manage set up and organization of the behavioral health triage services area, provide site-specific supervision of the BHS disaster response team, and facilitate essential communications.

Other responsibilities for Site Leads include:

- Provide on-site orientation and oversight of BHS disaster response team members assigned to assist in disaster response and recovery.
- Manage required site statistics.
- Liaise with LAC Manager and managers of other services.
- Facilitate communication between LAC and BHS Administration.
- Provide daily briefings to BHS Disaster Coordinator and the on-site BHS disaster response team members.
- Assure protocols are being followed.
- Make recommendations for alterations in service provision as needed.



Decorative Image

Note: Counseling services for first responders are frequently available through each responder's organization. BHS counseling and referral services may also be accessed via a

request to the Health Branch in the Emergency Operations Center. All BHS response activities must be coordinated via the OA EOC.

Administrative Services Organization (ASO) Telephone Access and Crisis Line (ACL)

ACL operates under contract to Behavioral Health Services (Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for program referral and crisis intervention services).



- Provides emergency telephone counseling and referral to disaster victims seeking psychological services. The ASO provides feedback information to the BHS Disaster Coordinator, as appropriate, including the number of calls, type of calls received and trends.
- Acts as an entry point to the behavioral health system for persons seeking help.
- Reports identified needs in the community for additional disaster-related services to the BHS Disaster Coordinator. Advises BHS of critical events.
- The ASO and 24-hour ACL will provide alert information to the BHS Disaster Coordinator, as appropriate.
- Works with the BHS Disaster Coordinator to identify ASO staff to assist with disaster response, as needed.
- Works with BHS Disaster Coordinator to identify individual practitioners, as needed.

All County of San Diego, Behavioral Health Services Programs

- Prepare COOP and functional checklists for behavioral health response to a disaster, including a system for automatic reporting of pre-designated personnel to assigned disaster posts.
- Train personnel and alternates.
- Maintain accurate and complete records of all disaster related activities concerning personnel timekeeping, mission tasking and resource expenditures.



Hospital Administrators - San Diego County Psychiatric Hospital and Edgemoor Distinct Part Skilled Nursing Facility

- Activate hospital disaster plans.
- Keep the BHS Disaster Coordinator informed of the general status of the hospitals and resource needs.
- As able, contribute available staff and resources to meet the larger behavioral health needs in the community.
- May serve as alternate facility for patients evacuated from other local hospitals.

County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services Staff

- "All public employees and all registered volunteers of a jurisdiction having an accredited disaster council are Disaster Service Workers," per Government Code Title I, Division 4, Chapter 8, and Labor Code, Part I, Division 4, Chapters 1 and 10.
- Be familiar with the contents of this annex.

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- Possess a valid County Identification Card, professional license, and other preparedness items, as may be required.
 - See to the safety of themselves and their families in a disaster and then be prepared to fulfill their responsibility to the County.
 - Be available for callback. Monitor television and radio stations to keep informed of the situation.
 - Use discretion in reporting to regular workstations (i.e., road damage, other impending hazards).

Behavioral Health Services Response

There are a variety of Behavioral Health Services sites. During a disaster, the site management takes the following actions:

- Activates facility/program disaster plan.
- Assesses the degree of damage to the facility.
- Determines staffing needs and implements call-back procedures, if necessary.
- Establishes a communication link between the facility and the Behavioral Health Disaster Coordinator.
- If necessary, reorganizes program operations to support County response.

DIRECTION, CONTROL, OR COORDINATION

PLAN ACTIVATION AND TERMINATION

Activation and termination of this annex shall be by the direction of:

- County CAO in that capacity, or as Director/Coordinator of Emergency Services; or
- Designated Deputy CAO; or
- Director, OES or designated representative; or
- The BHS Director or BHS Assistant Director and Chief Operations Officer may also activate this annex.

Upon activation, the BHS Director and OA EOC/Policy Group, as appropriate, will determine the extent of behavioral health services needed for the disaster and notify the appropriate parties. The overall goal of the Behavioral Health Annex is to minimize loss of life, human suffering, emotional aftermath, and subsequent disability by ensuring timely and coordinated behavioral health assistance in times of emergency. The strategies to accomplish this goal are to:

- Coordinate the utilization of behavioral health facilities and the procurement, allocation, and distribution of behavioral health personnel, supplies, and other resources.
- Develop a system for County, ASO, and contracted behavioral health staff to provide emergency behavioral health intervention services for disaster victims, emergency response personnel and the community in general.

- Provide a system for receiving and disseminating behavioral health information necessary for effective response to, and recovery from a major disaster.



DIRECTION OF RESPONSE

The BHS Director, or designee, will establish an internal command center for the collection of information on the status of programs and contracted program services and the status of staff and facilities.

COORDINATION

BHS staff will respond according to the Incident Command System (ICS) and communicate with the OA EOC. BHS will provide support to disaster response as requested. When necessary, BHS will request assistance according to the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and ICS.

INFORMATION COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Dissemination of information and education in the aftermath of a disaster with victims, emergency responders, and the community at large is accomplished in several ways:

- BHS Disaster Coordinator working with administrative leads and media staff assures the broadcasting of information about the immediate availability of behavioral health services using social and traditional media formats and other available resources in accessible formats.
- BHS will cooperate with OES and the Joint Information Center (JIC) to get public service messages in accessible formats to the media concerning the types of behavioral health



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- services available and the location of these services as well as educational information to help victims.
- BHS Disaster Coordinator working with administrative leads will ensure 2-1-1 has the appropriate information to distribute to people who inquire about the availability of behavioral health services.
 - The Emergency Alert System (EAS), radio, television, newspapers, AlertSanDiego website, and the Alert San Diego App are mechanisms by which disaster information is disseminated to the public. Posters, flyers, and other printed messages can also be used at disaster sites, shelters and facilities (See [Annex L: Emergency Public Information](#)).
 - BHS will help staff crisis phones, when necessary.
 - BHS will deploy community outreach workers (either door-to-door or via community meetings) to inform the community about available behavioral health services and activities, when necessary.

COMMUNICATIONS

The BHS Director or designee will communicate the status of program service delivery, facility status, and unmet needs, to the OA EOC and designated staff via email, text messaging, phone, as available.

ADMINISTRATION, FINANCE, AND LOGISTICS

BHS is the lead for directing all administration, finance and logistics policies supporting the response of BHS in accordance with this annex and the BHS COOP. Consistent with ICS principles, BHS will establish a command structure that integrates with the OA EOC management structure.

ANNEX DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

This annex is a product of the OA EOP. As such, the policies, procedures, and practices outlined in the OA EOP govern this annex. OES is subject to coordinate the maintenance and update of this annex every four years, in accordance with the maintenance schedule established for the OA EOP. Record of changes, approval, and dissemination of the OA EOP will also apply to this annex.

Updates to the appendices of this annex can be made before such time for multiple reasons, including but not limited to changes in policy/procedure, improvements and recommendations based on real life events or exercises, etc. Recommended changes should be submitted to OES at oes@sdcounty.ca.gov.

Annex M was developed by County of San Diego Behavioral Health Services and is maintained by the BHS Disaster Coordinator.

AUTHORITIES AND REFERENCES

This annex is authorized by the Emergency Services Agreement of the County of San Diego, and in compliance with SEMS as California's emergency response system and the fundamental structure for the response phase of emergency management. SEMS incorporates the use of the ICS, California Disaster and Civil Defense Master Mutual Aid Agreement (MMAA), the OA concept and multiagency or inter-agency coordination.

- California Government Code § 8593.3 (2024) – Accessibility to Emergency Information and Services
- Telecommunications Act of 1996
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2, 2023

ATTACHMENT 1 – BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DISASTER OPERATIONS

