



**Department for
the Aging**

Donna M. Corrado, PhD Commissioner

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New Funding Announced to Identify the Mental Health and Social Support Needs of Seniors Affected by Hurricane Sandy

NEW YORK—The Aging in New York Fund (ANYF), the charitable arm of the NYC Department for the Aging (DFTA), has been awarded \$1.7 million in funding by New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo’s office through the federal Superstorm Sandy Social Services Block Grant for Sandy Mobilization Assessment, Referral and Treatment for Mental Health (SMART-MH), a project to identify the mental health and social support needs of older adults in areas affected by Hurricane Sandy. DFTA and the Department of Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College will partner together to execute this initiative.

The SMART-MH project will be headed at DFTA by Dr. Jacquelin Berman and at Weill Cornell by Dr. Jo Anne Sirey, who will oversee outreach activities, mental health assessments and referral and treatment services for older residents living in areas affected by the storm. The SMART-MH team approach brings project staff to partner with communities and identify and address the emotional needs of adults 60 and older. The approach is modeled after the mental health initiatives employed after Hurricane Katrina to build community resilience. The SMART-MH interdisciplinary teams will be hired by Weill Cornell and will include a team leader, a mental health outreach worker, a clinician, and a consulting psychiatrist. All members will be culturally competent and speak the languages of the communities to which they are assigned, enabling the program to reach a large number of seniors in need of assistance.

“While Hurricane Sandy was traumatic for many New Yorkers, we are especially concerned about the affect it had on seniors. Older adults tend to be among the most vulnerable of the populations affected by a disaster and are also unfortunately the least likely to seek mental health treatment,” said DFTA Commissioner Donna Corrado. “We are grateful that Governor Cuomo’s office found our proposal worthy of funding and that we now have this unique opportunity to bring important mental health and social services to the people who need it most.”

“The Aging in New York Fund is honored to have been selected to receive the Superstorm Sandy Social Services Block Grant,” said Ali Hodin-Baier, Executive Director of ANYF. “Our goal is to make New York City the best place to grow old and in order to achieve this mission, we cannot allow those affected by the storm to fall through the cracks. This funding will allow our seniors to get the help they need and get back on their feet.”

Once outreach to build partnerships is underway, seniors will be offered a free assessment that will evaluate their needs and severity of symptoms. Service plans will be created that link older adults in need with aging and mental health services. In addition, the project will support the delivery of a brief intervention to address anxiety and depression. A comprehensive, integrated public health approach will be used to address at-risk alcohol use. All clients with mental health needs will be contacted a month later to determine if they received the necessary services.

“After a traumatic event like Hurricane Sandy, the effects on older adults can range from the profound impact of losing their life’s work and possessions to a wide range of difficulties such as memory disturbance, anxiety, insomnia, grief, depression, and medical problems worsened by stress,” said Dr. Sirey, an associate professor of psychology in clinical psychiatry at Weill Cornell. “Our goal is to identify needs and address the barriers that deter older persons from seeking and participating in mental health care and get them connected with vital services.”

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