

SUNY New Paltz program trains students to offer public mental health aid in disasters

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NEW PALTZ – Amy Nitza trains others to handle things she hopes don't happen but knows will, sooner or later, come anyway.

Disasters are like that, like Hurricane and Tropical Storm Harvey that poured historic rainfall onto Texas.

Helping in such catastrophes is what Nitza does. She is director of the Institute of Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz. It is what she trains students at the institute to do - and will do shortly.

Nitza, and Rebecca Rodriguez, the program and operations manager for IDMH, will lead 20 students from the institute to Texas over the college's winter break, she said.

That college is off from Dec. 21 to Jan. 23. It is a commitment of 14 days, she said, and the group will likely include both undergraduate and graduate students in the program.

The institute has helped out in similar situations before, including during the response to Hurricane Katrina and earthquake devastation in the Caribbean country of Haiti.

"Every semester you prepare for this," Nitza said. "Then you are in a situation of not wanting any disaster to happen but ready if one does."

The American Red Cross will fly the college's contingent to Texas, where they will head first to a staging area. Nitza said where they go next will depend on the needs at the time.

There is little doubt residents in Texas will still need help several months down the road.

Thousands are currently in shelters, hotels or motels, and rebuilding their homes is

likely to take months, if not years, officials have said.

Disasters often leave the victims with a sense of complete loss of control in their lives. Nitza said they will work to help victims regain that sense of control.

“We are not providing therapy. ... We are not trying to fix any problems they have but to get them back to the baseline, back to where they were before,” Nitza said.

“We want to reset a sense of being in control and ... just be present, be the one that holds the hope and positivity until they can help themselves.”

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