Psychologist Valerie Cole, PhD, was on sabbatical in Mexico when Hurricane Isidoro slammed into shore in 2002. Despite being out of power for 10 days, Cole jumped into action. Working with La Cruz Roja Mexicana, she delivered baby formula and other supplies to villages in the area.

Back then, Cole was just an American Red Cross volunteer, chairing a local chapter of about 65 mental health volunteers in New York. Today she’s on staff at Red Cross headquarters as the manager of disaster health and mental health services for the entire nation. As a national leader, Cole ensures that people affected by disaster get the health and mental health services they need and that staff and volunteers are physically and emotionally fit for deployment to disaster zones.

“We take a holistic approach to caring for people involved in disaster: mind, body and spirit,” says Cole. “We make sure people – whether the community affected by disaster or the disaster responders – are in good shape emotionally, physically and spiritually.”

**Drawn to disaster**

Cole, who earned a PhD in social and clinical psychology from the University of Iowa in 1996, was an assistant professor of psychology at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, N.Y., when she accompanied a student to meet an alumna working at the local hospital and found her own destiny. The alum volunteered on the local Red Cross disaster mental health team and encouraged Cole to volunteer. “The student didn’t get a whole lot out of it,” admits Cole, “but I made a life-long friend who got me involved in disaster mental health as soon as I got my license.”

Cole launched her private practice in 1999, specializing in adults, couples and adolescents with depression, anxiety disorders and other problems. That same year, she began what would be an 11-year stint of volunteering with the Red Cross.

Cole began her leadership in the Red Cross by chairing her local chapter of disaster mental health volunteers in Rochester. “That’s how I got my start: showing up at single-family fires in the middle of the night and working with families who had just lost everything,” says Cole.

Soon Cole’s purview began to expand statewide. In 2008, she moved up to New York state lead for the Red Cross, coordinating disaster mental health preparedness and response across the entire state. She also helped write a curriculum and develop and implement disaster mental health training for the New York State Office of Mental Health and Department of Public Health.

In 2011, Cole joined the staff of the American Red Cross national headquarters in Washington, D.C., as the senior associate for disaster mental health. In this role, Cole provided mental health support and supervised volunteers providing services after hurricanes, floods and other large-scale national disasters, including the Joplin, Missouri, tornado.

Last summer, she moved into her new role as manager of disaster health and mental health services.

**A major leadership role**

These days, Cole is much more likely to be in a meeting in her office than out in the field in the aftermath of a hurricane or other disaster.

Cole directly manages the work of the senior associates responsible for health services and disaster mental health services as well as nurses and other staff responsible for wellness. The system as a whole includes about 4,000 health service volunteers, 4,000 disaster mental health volunteers and 600 disaster spiritual care volunteers.

Cole’s job is to make sure that everyone affected by a disaster gets the health and mental health services they need. But the Red Cross is now going about that task in new ways, she says.
For one thing, Red Cross Disaster Services is no longer focused almost exclusively on disaster response. Instead, the organization is expanding its focus to include the entire disaster cycle: preparedness, response and recovery. In addition, the Red Cross is doing more to address the needs of those who help survivors. As a result, one of Cole’s responsibilities is staff wellness.

“We’re making sure that their exposure to traumatic sights, sounds and experiences is limited and that we’re providing support to those who are exposed,” she says. “We want to mitigate against the possibility of compassion fatigue or anything like that.”

Cole has also helped shape the Red Cross’ overall disaster mental health vision. She helped develop a handbook that lays out what the program is all about and also helped create the network of state mental health advisors, for example. Most importantly, she says, she has had a hand in shaping the Red Cross’ holistic vision. “That’s something I’m pretty proud about,” she says.

Cole isn’t always desk-bound, however. When a big disaster strikes, she will sometimes leave her office and head back out into the field. After Hurricane Sandy in 2012, for instance, Cole managed the disaster mental health response on Long Island.

No matter what she’s doing, Cole draws on her experience and skills as a psychologist. “Psychologists have the people skills as well as the academic background in analytical and evaluative skills that are important,” she says.

Her training helps ensure that the organization’s work is based on current, valid research, for example. “We try to make sure that our programs are at least evidence-informed, if not evidence-based,” she says.

Her clinical experience has also helped shape her work at the Red Cross, says Cole, who still has a very small private practice on the side. “Transition is what interests me the most,” she says. Whether it’s in her private practice or at work, her focus is helping people deal with difficult transitions, such as getting divorced, losing a job or surviving a terrifying disaster.

Psychologists’ unique skills are also what help make the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Disaster Response Network such a valued partner, says Cole (see sidebar). The network consists of about 2,500 psychologists with special training in disaster response who volunteer to help survivors and relief workers after a disaster.

Opportunities and challenges

Getting involved in that network is a great way to get active in disaster mental health, says Cole, adding that there are very few paid jobs in disaster mental health.

“This is not a good field to make money in,” she says. “But it’s a fabulous field to volunteer in.”

While many psychologists and others show up after a big event like Sept. 11, says Cole, they’re often not prepared to do the work that’s needed. Would-be volunteers should join their local Red Cross chapters and undergo training, says Cole, adding that the Red Cross offers periodic webinars to help train volunteers.

Most volunteer opportunities are at the local level rather than at big, national disasters, she adds. “It’s not particularly fun, exciting or glamorous, but that’s where the need is,” she says. “Even just giving a few hours a month is valuable to the local community and makes you ready for when the big disaster hits.”

Volunteering puts psychologists into contact with an amazing group of fellow volunteers, adds Cole, who says that working with volunteers is the best part of her job. “They’re an extremely dedicated, creative group with great experience, great ideas and incredible heart,” she says.

Plus, volunteering is its own reward, according to Cole. “Being part of the community is a good thing!”

INTERESTED IN DISASTER RESPONSE?
The American Psychological Association (APA) Disaster Response Network (DRN) consists of licensed psychologists with American Red Cross training in disaster response who offer volunteer assistance to relief workers and survivors in the aftermath of disaster. DRN members also engage in disaster preparedness and recovery activities such as teaching disaster courses, participating in planning meetings and educating the public about common reactions to disasters. The DRN office, housed in the APA Practice Directorate, tracks disaster mental health trends, research and resources and shares that information with DRN members. For more information about how you can participate in the DRN program, visit www.apa.org/practice/programs/drn/index.aspx.