

# EAPs extend role to help employers recover too

By JOANNE WOJCIK

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, many employers that provide employee assistance programs as a benefit to their workers are finding they are in need of assistance themselves.

And the EAPs are reaching out to their corporate clients, in most cases expanding the scope of their services to meet the unique needs stemming from this unprecedented catastrophe. In addition to the expected psychological and emotional counseling, EAPs are helping employers restore their business operations, teaching managers emergency response techniques, even tracking down missing employees.

It's almost as if the term should be changed to "employer assistance program."

"This is a very different disaster than 9/11. With 9/11, most of our activity was helping people deal with the psychological, emotional trauma, as well as the supervisors dealing with their respective employees in that regard," said Richard Chaifetz, chairman and chief executive officer of ComPsych Corp., a Chicago-based EAP.

"This situation is different because these people's basic needs have been obliterated—shelter, food, medical services, etc. So we have served as a logistics point for many employers...in the provision of information to the employees and interfacing with the employer...helping them find people or providing a resource for people to get in touch with us or others through our connections," he said.

In some cases, ComPsych is help-

ing employers plan for working off-site and develop backup plans for daily operations, he added.

ComPsych also has helped employees of its corporate clients find alternative housing and other necessary services "beyond what has traditionally been the domain of an EAP company," Mr. Chaifetz said.

"We have also been heavily involved in training managers in understanding emergency response and trauma issues, especially recovery, which is atypical of most EAP companies," he said.

CIGNA Behavioral Health also is going above and beyond the usual EAP call of duty by helping some of its employer clients locate employees who were displaced as a result of the storm, said Nance Moeller-Roy, director of clinical operations for the EAP in Eden Prairie, Minn.

"This is such a unique situation in that we have a number of employers who have missing employees. In fact, one of our larger customers is missing 1,200 employees," she said.

For that customer and about 10 other employers, "we're being asked to have any employee who calls in to call (a) hotline and report in to track people down and make sure that they're OK," she said.

CIGNA's EAP also has held several telephone "town hall meetings" for employers during which trained EAP counselors offer tips on responding to the disaster.

The calls serve as "a reminder that the EAP is here, and here are all the ways that we can help you and your employees," Ms. Moeller-Roy said.

But when employers listen in to the teleconferences, they often seek information outside of the usual scope of EAP services.

For example, employers participating in one of those telephone meetings sought information about changing employee mileage allowances in light of the recent spike in gas prices, as well as creating company identification badges for employees who had lost all other forms of identification.

Norfolk, Va.-based ValueOptions also is preparing a briefing for its clients, which will probably be conducted next week by telephone, to discuss the long-term effects of the disaster.

Chuck Taylor, executive vp of ValueOptions' Employer Solutions Division in Norfolk, Va., likened the situation to preparing military personnel for combat. The EAPs are working with managers to help them stay focused on helping employees in the midst of chaos.

In addition to emotional and psychological counseling services, ValueOptions also is providing information on emergency housing resources, relocation and financial assistance.

"For example, people are asking questions like, 'Do I need to pay my mortgage if my home has been destroyed?'" Mr. Taylor said.

LifeEra, the Portland, Ore.-based EAP subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group Inc., has been serving as an extension of the human resources department for many of its affected employer-clients, including Har-

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Harrah's Entertainment Inc., which it helped connect with an organizational consulting firm to develop a business recovery plan, according to Gene Baker, chief clinical officer.

Harrah's employs 8,000 employees in three casinos that were hit by Hurricane Katrina. Its accounting and technology center in Gulfport, Miss., also was damaged, according to a company spokeswoman in Las Vegas.

A LifeEra account manager is manning a makeshift employee assistance center for Harrah's employees in Gulfport. The EAP also is providing 17 counselors onsite at five other locations.

"It really is tactically challenging," said Mr. Baker. "We have one counselor for another customer who went to the employer's site and stayed there for several days. There were no hotels to go to. She helped coordinate the disaster recovery," he said.

"We see employee assistance programs as fundamentally reflecting a dual role: A role in support of organizations as they operate their businesses and in support of individuals who need assistance of one sort or another," said a spokeswoman for Farmington, Conn.-based Magellan Health Services Inc. said. In addition to having clients of its own,

Aetna subcontracts with Magellan to provide its mental health and EAP services to its health plan members.

In some cases—especially the current situation—that may mean going beyond the typical "emotional first-aid" that EAPs are generally known for, she said. "Finding food and shelter is not traditionally an EAP function," she said.

Although Hurricane Katrina is prompting EAPs to go beyond the usual scope of their operations, they have not lost sight of their original purpose. In fact, many are anticipating that those services will be in high demand once recovery efforts have slowed and both employees and employers are left to pick up the remaining pieces of their lives and businesses.

"We anticipate that over the next couple of weeks, as phone service is restored and as people are beginning to focus less on their immediate needs and more on the emotional impact, that our call volume will just keep getting bigger," said CIGNA's Mr. Moeller-Roy. "So we have a lot of contingency plans in place, and we have implemented our disaster response protocols so that we are able to handle the huge influx."

When clients' "physical needs are satisfied, that's when we'll see the need for more emotional and psychological support," said Mr. Baker of LifeEra.