

# Addressing Disaster-related Mental Health Among Immigrants in the Gulf South

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Mai Do, MD, DrPH, Associate Professor in the Department of International Health and Sustainable Development, has been awarded a \$1 million grant from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to address mental health issues related to disasters among young Vietnamese Americans living in the Gulf Coast region.

The three-year grant builds on a long-standing collaboration between Dr. Do and her SPHTM colleagues and the local Vietnamese American community that began in

2005 when a Tulane team led by Drs. Mai Do and Mark VanLandingham started investigating the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on long-term health outcomes within this major immigrant enclave. Close partnerships with local community-based organizations, including Vietnamese Economic Training Initiative and New Orleans East Community Health Center, have resulted in several successful joint ventures, including a participatory research project focusing on mental health aspects of COVID-19 and more practical support from Tulane as this community battles this novel virus (see pictures). Elsewhere in the Gulf South, Dr. Mai Do has been working with BPSOS, a Vietnamese community-based organization, in Houston, TX, to understand physical and mental health impacts of Hurricane Harvey, which drastically impacted the local Vietnamese population in 2017.

One major theme that emerged from this extensive body of work is the heightened risk of mental health challenges during and after a major disaster. Further exacerbating this issue, many Vietnamese Americans are reluctant to seek help due to significant cultural barriers to accessing mental health care, one of which is a high level of stigma surrounding mental illness.



This activity will directly address these disaster-related challenges to mental health among Vietnamese immigrants and their associated barriers to care access. The team will adapt and pilot a Self-Help Plus intervention, an evidence-based

intervention developed by the World Health Organization aimed at reducing psychological distress among individuals affected by adversities. They seek to assist and prepare young Vietnamese Americans in New Orleans and Houston to manage stress and overcome stigma related to mental health. Major goals are to help affected individuals recognize when they need to seek care and to facilitate getting the care when needed. Behavioral scientists at New York University, led by Dr. David Abramson, will adapt the existing Self-Help Plus tool for this population. Dr. Do's team at SPHTM will pilot and evaluate the intervention in collaboration with BPSOS in Houston and with VAYLA-New Orleans.

With increases in the frequency and severity of natural disasters in Gulf Coast region, Dr. Do's team will make efforts to mitigate adverse mental health impacts for this major immigrant population by making it more feasible, acceptable, and culturally appropriate to seek care.