

# **Project Liberty: The Quality of the Federal Response to Mental Health Agencies in the Aftermath of the World Trade Center Attack**

*(Released by the Office of Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney - October 22, 2004)*

## **INTRODUCTION:**

After the events of September 11, 2001, the New York mental health community faced many challenges in its path to recovery. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) initiated Project Liberty: “a coordinated outreach and Crisis Counseling Program for individuals, families, and groups most affected by the September 11 World Trade Center disaster and its aftermath.” The program reached more than one million New Yorkers and distributed funds to more than 100 mental health providers and community service organizations. However, it appears that Project Liberty’s lofty goals were not met, that many agencies had difficulty navigating Project Liberty, and the Project Liberty did not adequately address the psychological and emotional needs of those affected by 9/11. To ascertain the extent of these complaints, Congresswoman Maloney conducted a survey of the agencies that received Project Liberty funds. Of the 19 agencies that responded, only 17 agencies returned completed surveys. The results of the surveys are mixed but generally demonstrate that there were some serious flaws with the Project Liberty program.

## **RESULTS:**

### **Provider Information:**

*The majority of the mental health agencies surveyed had full service psychological and/or psychiatric facilities. The mental health needs of the majority of these agencies’ clients increased after 9/11. An average of 30% of these agencies’ clients sought mental health assistance specifically related to 9/11. Most agencies still see patients with September 11 trauma. Most agencies also feel that they were able to adequately address the mental health needs of the people who came to them for assistance after 9/11.*

The surveyed mental health agencies strive to meet the specific mental health needs of children, the elderly, families, individuals with substance abuse problems, immigrant communities, individuals with severe developmental or psychological problems, and HIV positive individuals. The agencies serve a wide range of demographics that varied by ethnicity, culture, age, income levels, nationality, and home borough.

Most of the surveyed agencies saw an increase in their clients’ mental health needs as a result of the September 11 disaster. Roughly 82.3% of all of the agencies saw an increase in mental health needs after 9/11: three agencies reported having nearly 100 percent of their clients come to them for assistance; another three agencies stated that somewhere between 15 and 30 percent of their clientele sought assistance; three agencies had 10 percent of the clientele come

for assistance; finally, five agencies had less than five percent of their clients come for 9/11 assistance. Three agencies did not respond to the survey.

Most agencies were able to adequately address the mental health needs of their clients post 9/11. In our survey, twelve agencies reported that they met their clients' needs. However, four agencies stated that they were unable to address the needs of their clients because of lack of funding. The agencies did not have enough staff to run their programs and/or were unable to provide medication and/or psychotherapy to their clients.

The majority of these agencies continue to see mental health needs regarding the events of 9/11, despite the cessation of Project Liberty. Fourteen of the agencies (82.3%) continue to see patients with 9/11 needs while only three agencies do not see cases related to 9/11 anymore.

### **Information Available About Project Liberty Funds:**

*The majority of the mental health agencies surveyed were first informed about the availability of Project Liberty funds for mental health assistance before the end of 2001. Most of the agencies were proactively provided information or assistance by Project Liberty staff, and as a result, most agencies found the application process sufficiently easy to navigate. However, 45 percent of the agencies' descriptions of the application process included complaints about the application process taking too long, being delayed, and requiring negotiation.*

The majority (12) of the agencies surveyed found out about Project Liberty funds before the end of 2001. Only one agency found out about the funds nearly a year after 9/11. One agency that initially found out about Project Liberty in October of 2001 did not find out about funds specifically for children's needs until early 2002.

Project Liberty proactively contacted eleven providers to provide assistance or information by phone and/or through meetings. Four agencies were not contact by Project Liberty at all. One agency complained that communication was a constant issue before they became a provider.

Although twelve of the agencies found the application process easy to navigate, three agencies found the application process difficult. Dr. Preiss-Lowenwirt of the Arista Center for Psychotherapy notes that "There was tremendous confusion" with the application process for Project Liberty. She says that the budget had to be constantly revised and the process required numerous phone calls in order for the application to be completed and accepted. Of the three agencies that had difficulty with the application process, only one states that he remembers being proactively contacted for information or assistance. Two agencies did not response.

When asked to describe the application process, six agencies found that they had very little to no difficulties with the application process. However, five agencies noted that the application process took a long time, was often delayed, and required negotiation. The final five

agencies chose not comment about the application process.

### **Timeliness of the Application Process:**

All but one of the reporting agencies applied for Project Liberty funds. Almost all of the agencies applied for funding within one year of September 11. The application process took an average of two months. Funds were available to most agencies within three months.

Of the nineteen agencies that responded to our inquiries, 16 applied for Project Liberty money. At least two of these agencies applied for money more than once. Two agencies applied for money before the end of 2001. Four agencies applied for money during the course of 2002 and only one responding agency applied for money in 2003. Ten agencies did not say when they applied for money. One agency did not apply for any money.

Of the seventeen agencies that completed our survey, the application process took less than a few days for only three agencies. Six agencies found that the application process took less than three months to complete. One agency reported that it took almost five months to complete the application process and the application process took nearly eight months for another agency to complete. Six of these agencies chose not to respond.

After the application process was complete, eight agencies had some if not all of their Project Liberty funds immediately. One of these agencies received its money in two payments: the first payment was received at the onset of the program and then the second payment was received five months later. However, one agency that had to wait two months to receive its money was in danger of having to fire its staff. It was forced to apply for a money advance. Two agencies did not receive Project Liberty funds until months after spending the money. One agency did not receive their money until the very latter part of the program. Five agencies chose not to respond.

### **Adequate Funding:**

Every agency that applied for funding was approved for the amount of money they applied for. However, only half of the agencies (53.8%) received the funds they expected to receive. Roughly 40% of the agencies said that the amount of funds they received from Project Liberty did NOT cover the needs of their client populations because Project Liberty focused too much on outreach and crisis counseling, forced agencies to look elsewhere for additional funds, and did not budget enough money for salaries of high level professionals.

The seventeen responding agencies received a wide range of funding from Project Liberty that ranged from a little over three thousand dollars to over two million dollars. The majority of these agencies (7) received somewhere between three hundred thousand dollars and a half a

million dollars. Nearly all of the agencies (14)<sup>1</sup> were approved for the amount of money they applied for. At least half of these agencies were told to expect the amount money they applied for. One agency was even asked to expand their budget from \$400,000 to \$996,000. Two agencies replied that they were told to expect funding based on the services they offered.

Despite these expectations, five agencies did not receive the money they were told to expect. One agency has been negotiating with Project Liberty for the last six months and still has not received all of the money allocated to them. Of the only seven agencies that reported receiving their expected funding, two did not receive their allocated money until the latter part of the program and only after a great deal of negotiation. Four agencies did not respond.

While the majority of the agencies felt that Project Liberty covered the needs of their clients, almost 40 percent felt the Project Liberty failed to meet the mental health needs of their clients. These six agencies cited different reasons for Project Liberty's failure to meet their clients' needs. Three agencies, including one of the agencies that felt that Project Liberty met their clients needs, were frustrated at the limited scope of Project Liberty. Project Liberty's focus on outreach and crisis counseling did not allow for money to be allocated for full psychiatric/psychological mental health treatment or medication management for those individuals who had the most mental health needs as the result of 9/11. Another major complaint was that three agencies had to rely on outside grants to supplement their services in order to fully assist their clients. Two agencies reported that there was not enough money budgeted through Project Liberty to pay the salaries of high level professionals.

Agencies had two primary experiences when Project Liberty denied them funds. The most common experience for agencies was that Project Liberty simply informed them that it did not cover certain expenses such as high salaries, traditional mental health services, or the costs of terminating the Project Liberty program at their agency. The other experience was to be first informed that funds were available for specific items, including advertising for staff, and then later to be informed that Project Liberty did not cover those items in the agencies' Project Liberty budgets.

#### **Assistance from the Federal Government:**

*An overwhelming majority of the agencies (76.5%) reported that the federal government did not do all that it could to address the mental health needs of individuals post 9/11. Roughly half of the agencies felt that Project Liberty did not specifically do enough for their agencies' clients. The delay of Project Liberty funds adversely affected nearly half of all of the agencies and their clients in some way. Almost two thirds of the agencies felt that they did not have the flexibility to spend money in the best possible manner to meet the needs of their clients because they could not deviate from the budget to address the changing needs of their clients and because*

---

<sup>1</sup> Three agencies did not respond as to whether or not they were approved to receive the funding they applied for.

*Project Liberty did not allow for a wide enough array of interventions.*

When the agencies were asked if the federal government did all it could do to address the mental health needs after 9/11, thirteen agencies said that the government did not do enough. They cited several different reasons for why they thought the federal government could have done more. The most common criticism of Project Liberty was that the program limited its scope too much by only funding outreach and crisis counseling. Seven of these agencies felt that Project Liberty should have covered the psychiatric and psychological treatment of those who were severely affected by 9/11. These agencies felt handicapped in their ability to address medical conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because they required more extensive treatment than crisis counseling. Three agencies felt that the program ended too soon. They are still identifying individuals who need help coping with the events of 9/11. Two agencies felt that the program did not adequately address the specific needs of children. One agency complained that Project Liberty was too focused on the events and aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Only three agencies felt that the federal government did all it could to address the mental health needs post 9/11. One agency chose not to respond.

These agencies were asked if they felt Project Liberty sufficiently responded to the needs of their clients. Eight agencies felt Project Liberty addressed the needs of their clients. One agency said that Project Liberty was an enormous benefit to their community but did not completely address all of the needs of their clients. Seven agencies felt the Project Liberty *did not* address the needs of their clients. They felt the Project Liberty was too limited in its focus, did not do enough to assist those individuals who did not have insurance, and did not adequately address the needs of immigrants.

The survey asked the different organizations if their clientele were adversely affected by the backlog of funds. Five agencies' clients were not affected by the backlog. Three agencies felt that some but not all of their clients were adversely affected by the delays. Seven of the organizations said that their clientele were indeed adversely affected by the backlog. Seven agencies, including some that said their clients were not affected by the backlog, reported that they had to support the programs by themselves for several months while waiting for Project Liberty funding. Agencies without enough money to sustain their Project Liberty programs by themselves could not hire staff or had to let some staff go while they waited for Project Liberty. Two agencies noted that the delays in funding adversely affected their programs for children. One agency noted that if it had been able to help individuals earlier, the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) would have been significantly lower. Another agency said that it could have conducted additional programs and helped more people if the money had come in earlier.

Although four agencies felt that Project Liberty was flexible enough to meet the needs of their clients, nine agencies stated that Project Liberty needed to be more flexible in order to fully address their clients' mental health needs. The agencies that thought Project Liberty was inflexible cited several ways the program could have been more flexible. One agency noted that there was no room to deviate from the budget as different needs arose. Another agency remarked

that Project Liberty had no conception of how to deal with a sophisticated city with varied mental health needs. This idea was echoed by two other agencies that complained that Project Liberty did not allow for a wide enough array of interventions and did not truly allow agencies to meet the needs of their clientele. Another organization stated that the program did not permit agencies to talk about other topics that were not directly related to 9/11. One agency stated that in the beginning Project Liberty was flexible and allowed the agency to meet the needs of their clientele. However, as the program progressed, Project Liberty became more inflexible and did not allow the agency to anticipate sudden changes in the community. Two agencies abstained from responding.

### **Curtailment of Project Liberty Funds:**

*The vast majority of agencies (70.5%) had their funds curtailed by Project Liberty for a number of reasons. The curtailment of funds forced agencies to seek other sources of funding and provide fewer services.*

Even though five agencies did not have their funds curtailed, twelve agencies reported that they were contacted by Project Liberty and their Project Liberty funds were curtailed. Project Liberty reduced these agencies' funds for several reasons. Four agencies found that their funds were decreased because they did not spend their allocated amount of money during the first six months of the program. These agencies complained, though, that Project Liberty did not take into account the slow start process of a new program, the changing needs of their clientele, and/or staffing delays. One agency was never given a clear reason why its funding was curtailed and another agency had its money rescinded because it was too small of a program. As a result, four agencies state that they had to use other sources of funding to supplement the costs of their program. Three agencies complained that they had to provide fewer services because of the curtailment of funds. One agency complained that because the funds were curtailed, it was forced to use the money to ensure that high *quantities* of people were helped at the expense of providing high quality care. Finally, at least one agency said that the curtailment of funds resulted in low morale and reduced quality of services.

### **SUMMARY:**

Project Liberty was a program that helped many people in New York in the wake of September 11. Our survey demonstrates both the strengths of the program and its weaknesses. With such a small sample group, these results are not definitive. However, they do highlight some noteworthy trends. The study clearly demonstrates that the people of New York were deeply affected by September 11 and needed assistance to help with the healing process. While the results are mixed, it demonstrates that most of the agencies felt that the federal government and Project Liberty did not do enough to address the psychological and psychiatric needs of people post 9/11. The agencies' most common critique of Project Liberty was that the program was too limited in its scope because it only offered funding for outreach and crisis counseling. Many of these agencies felt that the referral system was inadequate for those diagnosed with greater psychological problems than crisis counseling is capable of addressing. There was also a

significant problem with the program's delivery of funds. Too many agencies had to use their own funds or funds from other sources while they waited for Project Liberty funds. While Project Liberty was a wonderful program and benefitted many people in our community, there are some serious flaws that need to be addressed.