



Crisis Within a Crisis: What Service Providers Need to Know About Post-Disaster Abuse

Panelists

Emma Churchman, Chrysalis Alliance
Kristy Vick-Stratton, Kentucky Legal Aid
Hannah Ellis, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Moderator

Whitney Bailey, AppalReD Legal Aid



Whitney Bailey

whitneyb@ardfky.org



Emma Churchman

emma@traumarecoverycertification.org



Kristy Vick-Stratton

kvickstratton@klaid.org



Hannah Ellis

hdyal@trla.org

Crisis Within a Crisis

Panel Moderator – Whitney Bailey



Whitney Bailey is the Disaster Response Project Director at AppalReD Legal Aid in eastern Kentucky, where she leads efforts to provide civil legal services and community education to low-income disaster survivors. Before joining AppalReD, Whitney ran a solo civil law practice in Lexington, Kentucky. She serves as a Vice Director of the ABA Young Lawyers Division's Disaster Legal Services Program and on the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) Disaster Legal Committee. She is active in statewide and local initiatives, including her role as Seventh District Representative for the Kentucky Bar Association YLD Executive Committee.

whitneyb@ardfky.org

Crisis Within a Crisis: What Service Providers Need to Know About Post-Disaster Abuse

***Domestic Violence Advocacy – Housing Stability – Disaster Recovery –
Pro Bono Engagement – Community Partnerships***

This panel discussion explores the alarming rise in elder abuse and domestic violence that often follows natural disasters—an overlooked secondary crisis that places already-vulnerable individuals at even greater risk. Attendees will gain insight into why abuse escalates during periods of displacement and instability, how trauma and resource scarcity compound danger, and what warning signs may be harder to detect in chaotic post-disaster environments. The session highlights practical strategies for service providers, including trauma-informed approaches, cross-agency coordination, and safety-planning considerations tailored to disaster contexts. Participants will leave better equipped to recognize, respond to, and help prevent abuse when communities are at their most fragile.

Crisis Within a Crisis: Agenda

1. Trauma, Abuse, and Disaster – Emma Churchman
2. Elder Abuse and Disaster – Hannah Ellis
3. Domestic Violence and Disaster – Kristy Vick-Stratton



Crisis Within a Crisis: **Trauma, Abuse, & Disaster**

Panelist – Emma Churchman



Emma M. Churchman is a nationally certified trauma chaplain, disaster-response practitioner, and the President and CEO of The Chrysalis Alliance. With 25+ years in trauma recovery and crisis leadership—and experience supporting communities through large-scale disasters—Emma equips front line service providers with practical tools to respond effectively when instability increases risk. Her work helps service providers process their own trauma—so it doesn't spill into the people they serve—while equipping them with practical, real-time tools to support survivors' healing in the moment, especially in high-stress, post-disaster environments. Emma holds a Master of Divinity and is a PhD candidate in Conscious Business Ethics. She is also the author of *The Deep End of Hope in the Wake of Hurricane Helene* (GracePoint, 2025) and *Navigating the Deep End: Resilient Leadership in a Volatile World* (GracePoint, 2026).

emma@traumarecoverycertification.org

CRISIS WITHIN A CRISIS

What Service Providers Need to Know About Post-Disaster Abuse



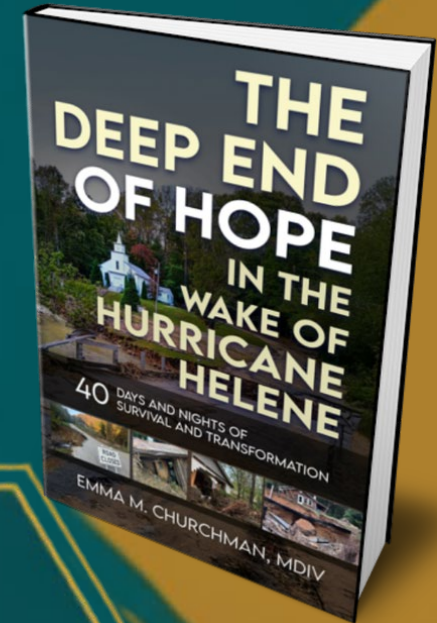
Emma M. Churchman, MDiv

President & CEO

The Chrysalis Alliance Inc.

*a nonprofit dedicated to training frontline disaster
workers in trauma recovery*

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THE SECONDARY CRISIS

THE STORM MAKES THE NEWS. THE ABUSE THAT FOLLOWS DOESN'T.



◆◆
A hidden mortality gap reveals a predictable, preventable
secondary crisis after every major disaster



OFFICIAL DEATH COUNT

24

average deaths recorded
per hurricane by official
government counts



ACTUAL EXCESS DEATHS

7,000–11,000

excess deaths in the 15 years
following an average U.S. hurricane



THE LONG TAIL OF DISASTER

457*

more deaths than official
counts — a gap researchers
now call the long tail



Source: Young & Hsiang (2024). "Mortality Caused by Tropical Cyclones in the United States." Nature, Vol. 635. Stanford



WHY ABUSE ESCALATES

DISASTER DOESN'T CREATE ABUSERS.

IT REMOVES EVERY BARRIER THAT WAS CONTAINING THEM.

CONTRIBUTING FORCES



Loss of income and housing stability

when income, shelter, and safety nets collapse simultaneously



Displacement into crowded, unfamiliar spaces

unfamiliar environments eliminate established safety routines



Overwhelmed law enforcement & severed social networks

reduced accountability creates conditions for escalating control and violence



Substance use surge & intensified power dynamics

isolation and substances amplify aggression & coerce control



Severed social networks

eliminates protective buffers of neighbors, family, faith communities



Power and control dynamics intensify

when survivors depend on a partner or family member for shelter, medication, FEMA access

POST-DISASTER ABUSE DATA:

4X



Increase in intimate partner violence after Hurricane Katrina

2X



DV killings doubled after Hurricane Maria; elder adults 2.11x more likely to develop PTSD

62%



Increase in requests for DV survivor services post-Hurricane Maria

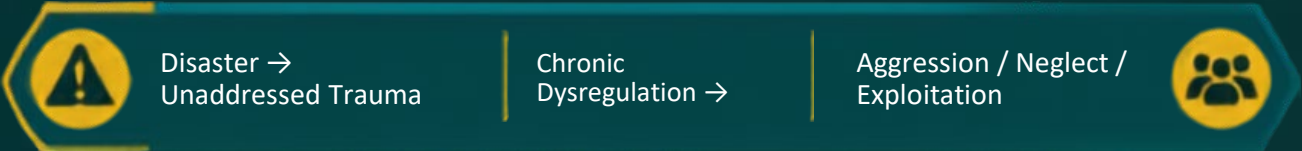
40%



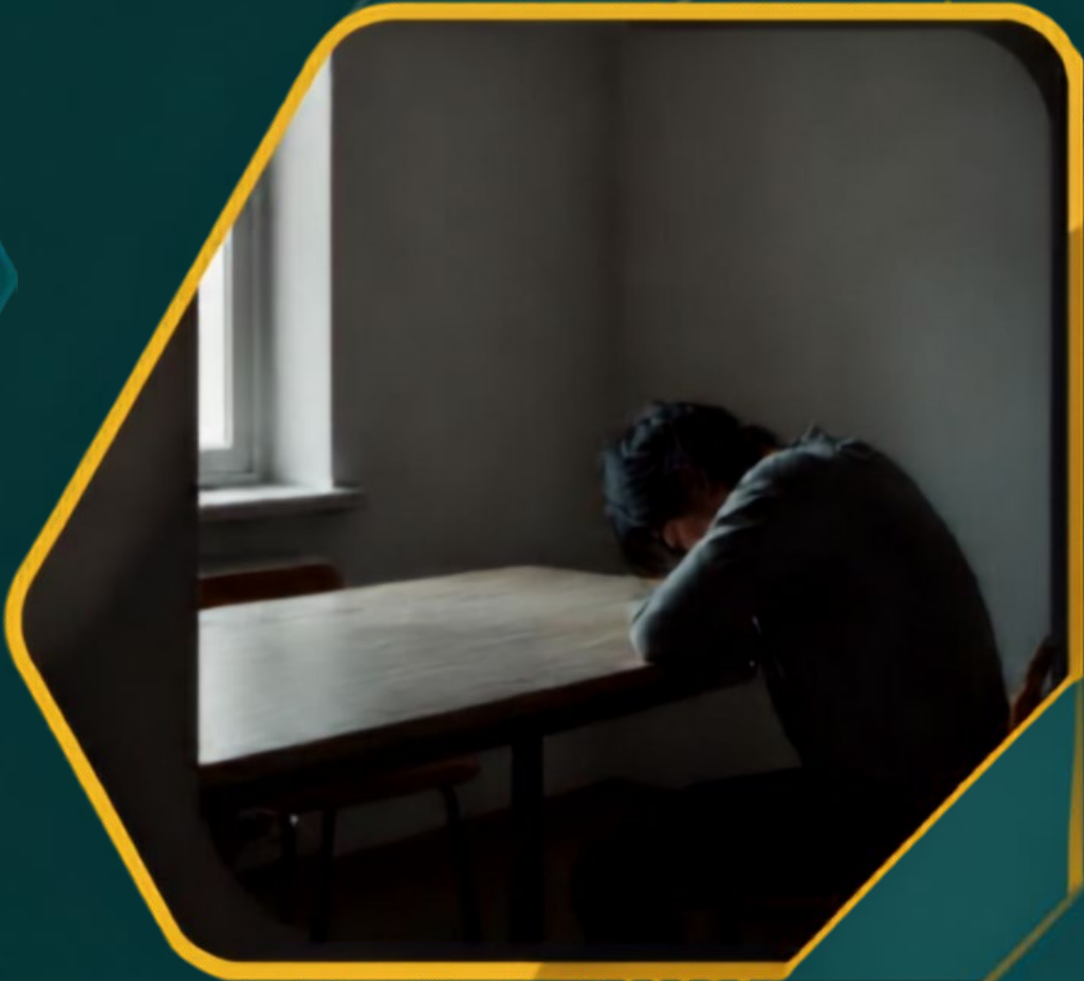
Increase in DV shelter requests after major disasters; 1 in 10 older Americans experience abuse annually

Unaddressed Trauma Is Not a Mental Health Issue.
It is a Public Safety Issue.

HOW TRAUMA AND LIMITED RESOURCES
COMPOUND DANGER



-  **NEUROLOGICAL IMPACTS**
Elevated cortisol impairs judgment and emotional regulation
-  **RELATIONAL IMPACTS**
Hypervigilance disrupts safety assessment and trust
-  **CAREGIVER RISK**
Burnout becomes a direct precursor to neglect and violence
-  **POLICY & RESOURCE GAPS**
FEMA & SAMHSA limitations leave a patchwork response — trauma recovery services overwhelmed, Psychological First Aid not sustained



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WARNING SIGNS

The chaos of disaster is cover. Know what you're looking for.

 WARNING SIGN	 HOW DISASTER DISGUISES IT	 WHAT TO DO
 Partner controls all money/resources	Appears normal when one partner manages disrupted logistics	Ask privately: "Can you access money on your own right now?"
 Survivor fearful, deferential, unable to speak freely	Attributed to shock or generalized trauma response	Create a private moment. Every survivor deserves one question alone.
 Physical injuries	Attributed to disaster — falls, debris, structural damage	"How did this happen? Were you alone?"
 Survivor isolated from support	Appears normal when whole community is displaced	"Is there anyone from before the disaster you've been able to reach for help?"
 Reluctant to accept services without partner	Appears as reasonable desire to stay together in crisis	"We speak with each person separately — that's our standard intake."

Elder Abuse

Warning Signs

The chaos of disaster is cover. Know what you’re looking for.

 Warning Sign	 How Disaster Disguises It	 What To Do
 New caregiver with excessive control	Appears as helpful family stepping up	“Is this arrangement your choice?”
 Older adult confused, frightened, withdrawn	Attributed to disaster trauma or cognitive decline	“Before the disaster, how was your mood? Your memory?”
 Sudden changes in documents, accounts, property	Attributed to estate planning or disaster logistics	Flag for APS — disaster is a known trigger for financial exploitation
 Caregiver refuses to leave older adult alone	Appears as protective concern	“This is our protocol with every client — I’ll just be a moment.”

Trauma Recovery Tools for Post-Disaster Response

Trauma recovery is not a philosophy. It is a practice.

01



IMMEDIATE PHASE

Hours to Days

Stabilize before you assess

5-4-3-2-1 Senses Inventory to
ground survivors

No trauma disclosure
required for services

02



SHORT-TERM

Weeks 1-8

Normalize the
trauma response,
not the abuse

Address mental, emotional &
spiritual distress directly

03



LONG-TERM

Months 2+

Treat root trauma,
not just symptoms

Avoid silencing
phrases about
recovery timelines

Build sustainable
regulation capacity

04



WHAT NOT TO DO

Don't Acquire Trauma

Don't minimize experience

Don't promise
recovery timelines

Don't neglect provider
self-care

13

5-4-3-2-1 Senses Inventory

Name 5 things you can see right now... 4 you can touch... 3 you can hear... 2 things you can smell... 1 thing you can taste" — moves a survivor from survival mode into enough presence to engage

90-Second Reset

Guided breathing — 4 counts in, hold 4, exhale 6—for 90 seconds measurably lowers cortisol and interrupts fight-or-flight.

CROSS-AGENCY COORDINATION & DISASTER SAFETY PLANNING



01

BEFORE



- 1 Include trauma recovery in VOAD and emergency management planning tables.
- 2 Establish shared trauma-informed intake language across agencies.
- 3 Map behavioral health referral pathways for after-hours needs.
- 4 Embed trauma recovery at intake — not only as a referral.

02

DURING



- 1 Embed trauma recovery support at intake — not as a referral after everything else has failed
- 2 Universal check-in question:
"How are you doing right now, 1 to 10?"

03

ACROSS RECOVERY



- 1 Include DV, elder abuse, and trauma recovery at Long-Term Recovery Group tables.
- 2 Survivors must not navigate siloed systems alone — behavioral health belongs at every coordination table.

TRAUMA-INFORMED SAFETY PLANNING

The internal dimension:

A dysregulated survivor cannot execute a safety plan. Building internal safety capacity is not in competition with legal safety planning — it makes legal safety planning possible.

15

The Chrysalis Alliance



501c(3) Nonprofit | Where Crisis Becomes Capacity



Proactive Training

Trauma recovery training for leaders, teams, and organizations



Certification Program

For Frontline Workers to become Certified Trauma Recovery Practitioners®



Industry Frameworks

Call centers, field crews, leadership teams, healthcare, disaster response + recovery

40+

disaster recovery organizations supported - including 211 California, Salvation Army, United Way

5

disasters we're currently responding to nationwide, including LA Fires 2025 and Hurricane Helene

25+

years of experience delivering trauma recovery training and crisis response

16



CONTACT

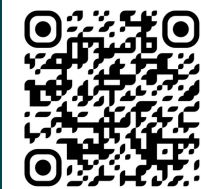
Emma M. Churchman, MDiv

President & CEO | Trauma Chaplain

emma@traumarecoverycertification.org | 828.419.0940



Donate to Provide Scholarships for Frontline Workers



Crisis Within a Crisis: **Elder Abuse & Disasters**

Panelist – Hannah Ellis



Hannah Ellis received her law degree from the University of Texas School of Law in 2017. Hannah is currently the Guardianship Team Manager and the Director of the Mental Health Project at Texas RioGrande Legal Aid (TRLA). Hannah's legal work has focused on Guardianships, Wills and Estates, and Disaster Recovery. While at TRLA, Hannah completed a fellowship as part of the inaugural Equal Justice Works Disaster Recovery Legal Corps from 2018 to 2020 and a second fellowship as part of the Equal Justice Works Disaster Recovery Program from 2020-2021. Hannah also served as a member of the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division Disaster Legal Services Team from 2019-2020, working with disaster response organizations nationwide.

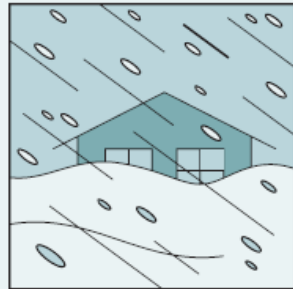
hdyal@trla.org

A central white rectangular box with rounded corners contains the text "ELDER ABUSE and DISASTERS". The word "ELDER ABUSE" is in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font, with the word "ABUSE" underlined. Below it, the word "and" is in a smaller, lowercase, black, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the word "DISASTERS" is in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. Surrounding the central box are several colorful, stylized illustrations of various disasters: a house on fire (top left), a tsunami wave (top right), a volcano erupting (bottom center), a city with an earthquake (bottom left), and a city with a large fire (bottom right). There are also smaller illustrations of a house being hit by a lightning bolt (middle left) and a city with a large fire (middle right).

ELDER ABUSE and **DISASTERS**

WHAT IS ELDER ABUSE

- Physical
- Emotional
- Financial



**WHO STRUGGLES
DURING DISASTERS?**

VULNERABILITY FACTORS

Health

- More chronic conditions
- Higher need for immediate medical care
- More vulnerable to loss of infrastructure

Mobility

- Greater reliance on assistive devices
- Higher support requirements from caregivers

Social

- Less likely to receive advanced notice
- May not have support system needed to evacuate or prepare

Mental

- Potential for psychological distress
- Caregivers for persons with dementia may be unprepared

**WHO STRUGGLES
AFTER DISASTERS?**

VULNERABILITY FACTORS



Poverty

Scams

POVERTY AND RECOVERY

Over 90% of the total money income received by elderly low income populations came from Social Security

- Fixed income creates inability to make up the gap in finances
- Less savings
- Elderly populations more likely to rely on FEMA to recover
- Increasing reliance on online applications and portals for FEMA

SCAMS

Increased Risk of Scams Post Disaster

Fraudulent
contractors

Insurance
Fraud

Government
Impersonators

Phishing

Increased
pressure and
stress

Crisis Within a Crisis: **Domestic Violence & Disasters**

Panelist – Kristy Vick-Stratton



Kristy is the Lead Disaster Response Attorney and Managing Attorney of Kentucky Legal Aid's Bowling Green Office. A graduate of Western Kentucky University and the University of Louisville's Brandeis School of Law, she began her career clerking for a family court judge, then served as an Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney and Assistant Public Advocate before joining KLA in 2017. In 2022 she began leading KLA's disaster legal response program for communities impacted by the 2021 tornadoes.

kvickstratton@klaid.org

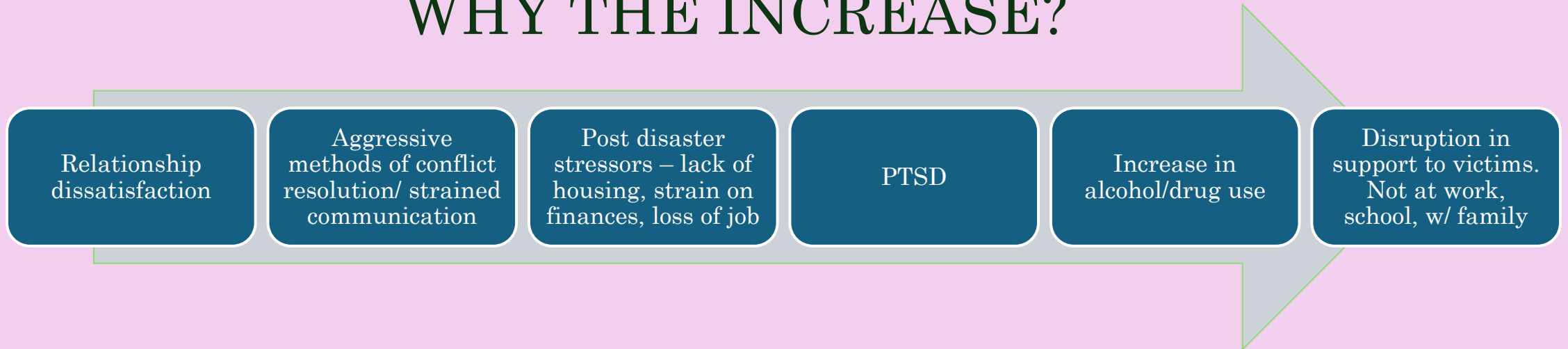


THE HIDDEN FALLOUT

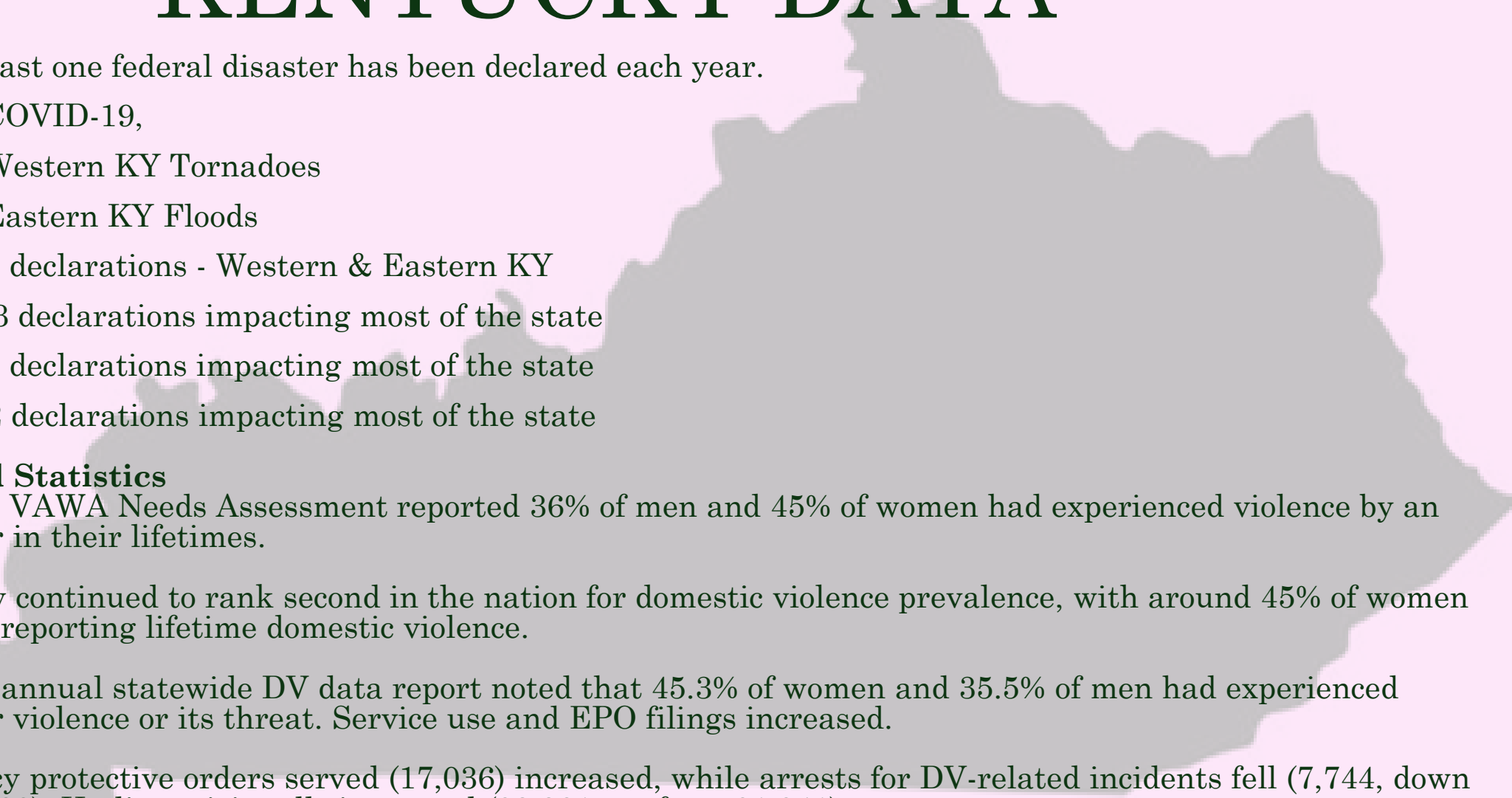
Where violence and disaster intersect, our understanding is tested and our opportunity to learn and help grows.

Disasters do not cause violence, but the physical, mental, and socioeconomic effects of disaster can escalate domestic violence.

WHY THE INCREASE?



KENTUCKY DATA



Since 2020, at least one federal disaster has been declared each year.

- **2020** – COVID-19,
- **2021** – Western KY Tornadoes
- **2022** – Eastern KY Floods
- **2023** – 2 declarations - Western & Eastern KY
- **2024** – 3 declarations impacting most of the state
- **2025** – 5 declarations impacting most of the state
- **2026** - 2 declarations impacting most of the state

DV Trends and Statistics

2020 – The 2020 VAWA Needs Assessment reported 36% of men and 45% of women had experienced violence by an intimate partner in their lifetimes.

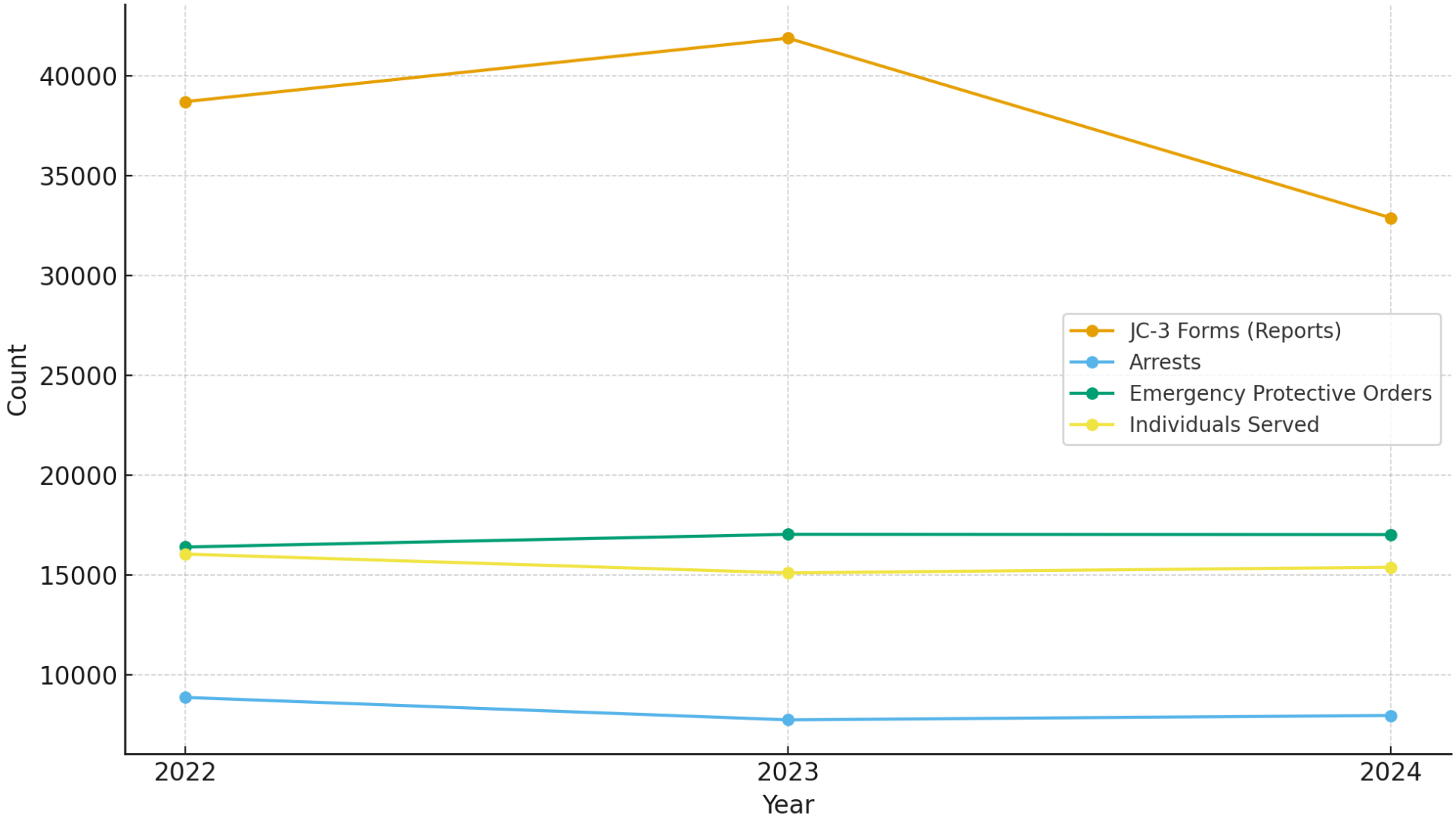
2021 – Kentucky continued to rank second in the nation for domestic violence prevalence, with around 45% of women and 35% of men reporting lifetime domestic violence.

2022 – The first annual statewide DV data report noted that 45.3% of women and 35.5% of men had experienced intimate partner violence or its threat. Service use and EPO filings increased.

2023 –Emergency protective orders served (17,036) increased, while arrests for DV-related incidents fell (7,744, down from 8,867 in 2022). Hotline crisis calls increased (23,381, up from 21,241).

2024 – The 2024 Kentucky Domestic Violence Data Report found overall rates stable, with a small increase in arrests and shelter services use, and a decrease in electronic JC-3 incident filings.

Domestic Violence Trends in Kentucky (2022-2024)



KENTUCKY SHELTER FEEDBACK



“During the pandemic, we saw firsthand what it was like to lose parts of our important systems that help each other. In crisis calls with survivors, we witnessed an escalation in the violence that survivors were experiencing, an increase in strangulations, and more weapons being used in the acts of violence because so many survivors were isolated...” Kelli Petronella, DOVES of Gateway Executive Director



“[T]he destruction brought by the storms can mean added stress or power shifts in a family, which can lead to an increased risk of violence.” Mary Foley, Merryman House Executive Director



“Our region has been impacted by significant flooding twice now - once in the summer of 2022 and again in February 2025. Due to this significant stressor to our community, there has been a rise in domestic violence cases and interpersonal violence. Currently, we provide case management to 12 tax credit units that are essential to our region and significant loss of housing resulting from flooding. We also provide case management and outreach services to 30 families who currently receive housing vouchers...” - Allie Rose, LKLP Safe House Executive Director



There’s a potential for an increase in domestic violence when people feel threatened... When people are nervous and concerned and they don’t have their needs met, when situations are heightened, explosive abusive incidents occur. Tori Henninger, Barren River Area Safe Space Executive Director

BARRIERS SURVIVORS FACE

- **Court Access** – Courts may be closed, have limited hours, or shift to remote hearings, making it harder to file or appear.
- **Communication Breakdowns** – Phone, internet, or power outages can prevent survivors from contacting legal aid, law enforcement, or the courts.
- **Transportation Issues** – Flooding, damaged roads, fuel shortages, or loss of a vehicle can stop survivors from getting to court or shelters.
- **Shelter & Safety** – Emergency shelters may be full or focused on disaster response, leaving fewer safe spaces for survivors fleeing abuse. What if a survivor returns home?
- **Basic Needs Prioritized** – Survivors may have to focus on food, housing, or childcare, making legal action feel out of reach.
- **Isolation with Abuser** – Disasters can force people into closer contact (e.g., evacuation shelters, damaged housing), limiting privacy and safe opportunities to seek help. This may also lead to a positive shift.
- **System Overload** – Law enforcement, courts, and aid agencies may be overwhelmed with disaster response, delaying DV-related cases. No privacy at locations where assistance is sought.
- **Documentation Loss** – Survivors may lose key paperwork (IDs, custody orders, medical records) in the disaster, making filing harder.
- **Emotional Strain** – Trauma from both the disaster and abuse can reduce capacity to navigate complex legal systems.
- **Language Access** – No access to a translator and/or no access to transcribed documents.



SAFETY IN PLANNING



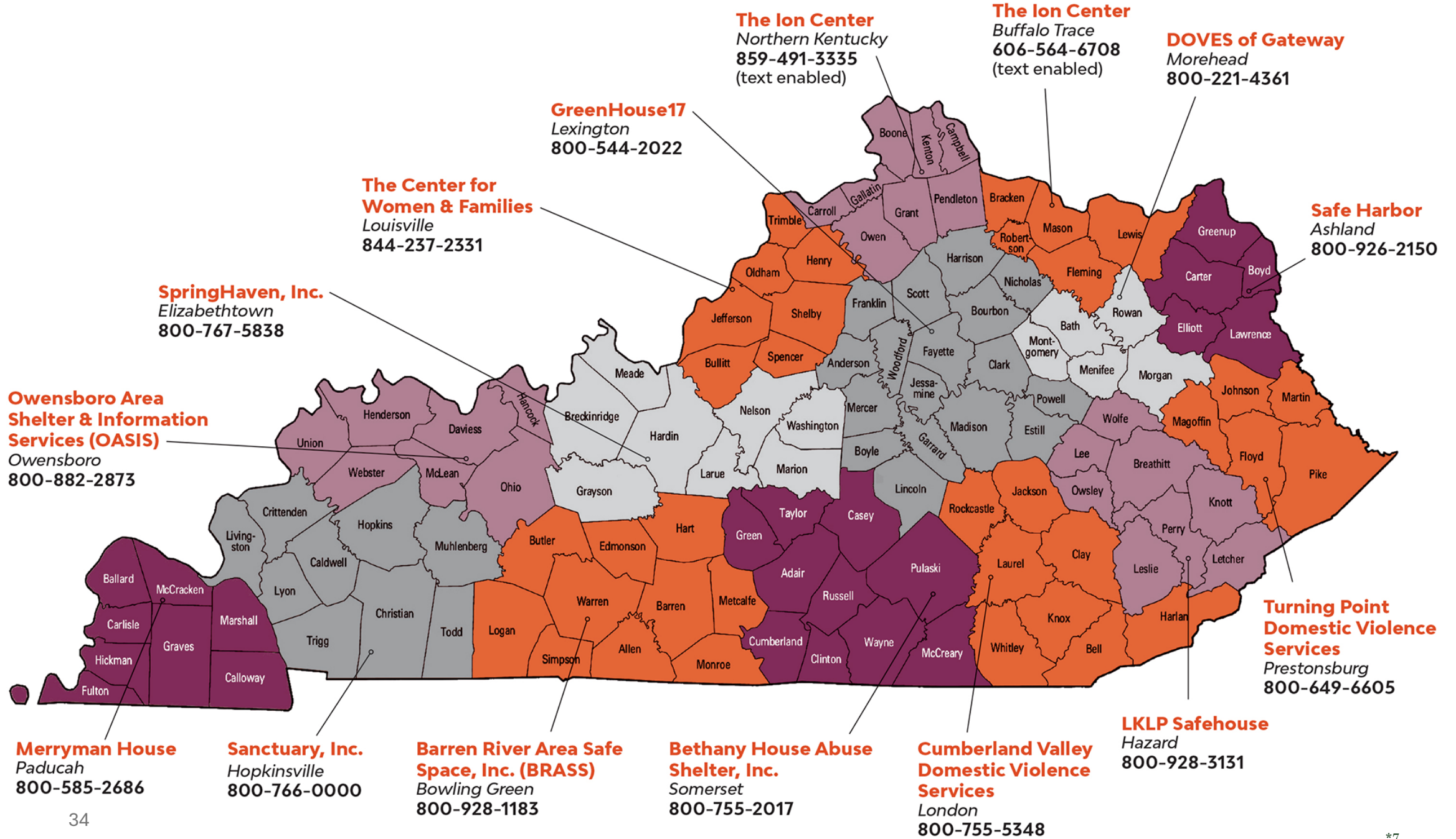
- Staff Training
 - DV
 - Continuity of Operations
 - Going Mobile
- Disaster Safety Planning With Existing Clients
 - Emergency Kits
 - Safe person to contact/safe location
 - Children
 - Pets
 - Documents
- Community/Agency Education
 - Law Enforcement
 - EMS
 - Local Emergency Mgmt.
 - What to do if DV disclosed,
 - What resources are available

STRONGER TOGETHER:

- Red Cross
- FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Legal Aid Programs:
 - The Appalachian Research and Defense Fund of Kentucky (AppalReD)
 - Kentucky Legal Aid (KLA)
 - Legal Aid of the Bluegrass (LABG)
 - Legal Aid Society (LAS)
- Kentucky Access to Justice Commission
- Long Term Recovery Groups (LTRG)
- State and National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD)
- Local Domestic Violence Shelters

It is important to develop relationships before a disaster strikes.





Thank you!

Questions?

Emma Churchman

emma@traumarecoverycertification.org

Kristy Vick-Stratton

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Hannah Ellis

hdyal@trla.org

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