

Space Shuttle Columbia Disaster

The shuttle disaster was a national tragedy that led to several CISM team responses. These articles describe the experience of two dedicated CISM teams, who were able to implement a response to ease the burden of this event for many.- ed.

A Learning Experience: Mobilization of EPA's New Peer Support & CISM Team for the Columbia Disaster

By Jan Shubert, LCSW

When the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrated over Texas during reentry to the earth's atmosphere on February 1, 2003, shuttle materials were scattered over a huge area, stretching from California through Arizona, Texas, and Louisiana. Within three days, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had deployed more than 400 people (EPA staff and contractors) from all over the country in response to a mission assignment from FEMA to conduct air monitoring and assist with the collection and transportation of material related to the shuttle. EPA worked at collection sites located in Hemphill, Nacogdoches, Palestine, and Corsicana, Texas as well as the disaster field office in Lufkin, Texas.

At the time of the shuttle disaster, EPA had a new and very inexperienced national Peer Support and- Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) Team. The team had been established partly in recognition of the- highly stressful nature of the jobs of EPA's 250 on-scene coordinators (OSCs) and partly in response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The OSCs are EPA's emergency responders, who work out of the agency's 10 regional offices and deal with a broad variety of hazardous materials-related incidents.

The first 18 members of the EPA team (OSCs, several mental health professionals and some additional regional and headquarters staff

members) completed their training with ICISF trainers Dr. Victor Welzant and Dr. George Everly in *CISM: Basic Group Crisis Intervention; CISM: Individual Crisis Intervention & Peer Support*; plus *Psychotraumatology for Clinicians* for the mental health team members, in late October 2002. Several team members were scheduled to take additional training.

at the ICISF Seventh World Congress in Baltimore in February. Although the team had developed an Operations Protocol, it was in need of considerable fine tuning particularly in the area of call-out procedures. In addition, the CISM concept was new to the agency, and some managers were still unsure about how or even if the services of the team should be used. The Region 6 (South Central U.S.) management team was familiar with the national CISM Team, however, and they fully supported the Team's deployment as part of the shuttle response.

In making these decisions, a number of questions had to be answered. Was there really a need for the team? Were EPA staff at risk of being traumatized? How could such a small team handle such a large geographic area? How would we deal with the desires of the OSC team members to participate in the recovery efforts as OSCs as well as CISM Team members.? How should we time our interventions? What kind of a rotation schedule should/ could we develop? Could a very inexperienced team handle this at all?

As we answered these questions, new questions arose. Did we come up with the right answers all of the time? Probably not. Did we make mistakes? Oh yes. Did we end up feeling that we had provided a useful service? Most definitely. Did we learn a lot in the process? Absolutely!

Our decision-making process was both complicated and unorthodox. Our first step was to send a Region 6-based (Dallas) team member, Beverly Negri, in to do a preliminary needs assessment two days after the shuttle disaster. Initially, it looked as if our services might not be needed. EPA staff were dealing with the "normal" stressors (e.g., equipment not arriving on time, cell phones not working in the field, collaborating with other agencies, etc.), rather than the kinds of situations they had faced at the World Trade Center. In a fairly short time, however, we recognized that the shuttle recovery work was very stressful in its own way. We did have some staff members who had found human remains and or personal belongings of the astronauts, and, in addition to sharing the national grief over the loss of people who were regarded as heroes, EPA staff, like everyone else working on the shuttle recovery, were working side by side with NASA staff, including astronauts for all of whom the lost crew had been family. Then there were the very long hours, nonstop rain, cold

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Spiritual Services Special Interest Group Forms

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will offer the course for the first time as part of the Learning Academy Spring semester (May 14-15).

Those attending the SIG meeting at the Seventh World Congress also discussed the possibility of a Certificate of Specialized Training specialty track for those with an interest in the integration of spiritual care and CISM. This track has been implemented as of January 2004. See the related announcement on page 1 of the Fall 2003 issue of *LifeNet*.

An email and mailing list was created for future communication between ICISF and those in attendance who were interested, and there was consensus that the Spiritual

Services SIG should meet again at

future World Congresses. If you are interested in being a part of the Spiritual Services SIG and being a part of the email list referenced above, please send an email message to George Grimm at gagrimm@icisf.org. There are no formal plans for additional action at this time, but as issues arise, the email list will enable the members of the group to have a collective voice.

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faculty, Glenn was a part of the team of people that developed the Pastoral Crisis Intervention course. He is an IC/SF-approved instructor for the CISM: Group Crisis Intervention; CISM: Individual Crisis Intervention & Peer Support; CISM: Advanced Group Crisis Intervention; and the Pastoral Crisis Intervention courses. Glenn was a founding Executive Director of C/SM Indiana Network. Inc.

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weather, difficult terrain, and mud, mud, and more mud.

Once we made the decision to activate our team, we had to deal with the other questions. When we should begin sending team members out and how to deal with the multiple collection sites, distances between the sites, and the rotation schedule of the incoming! outgoing EPA staff were all major issues. The upcoming, Seventh World Congress presented an additional temptation and complication for us. Several team members were scheduled for training at the Congress, and the event also offered the opportunity to meet with many of the country's experts in CISM. We had already turned to ICISF for advice, and Jeff Mitchell and Doug Mitchell had been extremely helpful.

We decided to delay deploying any team members until Sunday, February 16, to allow maximum participation at the World Congress. In many ways it was a good

decision. We did have the opportunity to meet with Terry Blais (who also had assisted with our initial training) and Christine Sullivan with the u.s. Coast Guard; Vaughn Donaldson, ICISF Region VI Liaison; and Paul Tabor, the Texas State CISM Director. However, we had not reckoned with the magnetic attraction between ICISF World Congresses and emergencies (e.g., Waco, Texas, 1993; Oklahoma City, 1995; Columbine High School, 1999). Not only was the 2003 World Congress preceded by the shuttle disaster, but one of the heaviest snowfalls in local history descended on the Baltimore/Washington area on February] 5-16. Needless to say, no one from the Washington area left for Texas on February 16. Fortunately, we were able to deploy two team members who were not affected by the blizzard. OSC team members, Karen McCormick (Region 6-Dallas) and Jim

MacDonald (Region 7-Kansas City) were able to travel to the shuttle response area and provide peer support services at the various collection sites. The next group of four CISM Team members (Glen LaJ!sley, Region 3-Philadelphia; Janice Kroone, Region 7-Kansas City; Pat Seppi, Region 2-New York; Jan Shubert, HQ) arrived in Texas on March 3 and stayed for a week. We split that group into two teams of one OSC and one mental health professional each and divided up the collection sites, and met to debrief at the end of the week before returning home. We continued to rotate groups of team members (Pam Harting-Barrat, Region 1-Boston; Johanna Miller, Region 8 - Denver; Jack Kelly, Region 3- Philadelphia; and Kristina Meson, HQ) in over the next two months.

What did we learn? Nearly a year later, we're still processing our response and continuing to learn.

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We've learned a lot of internal lessons (e.g., the importance of being able to quickly process government travel authorizations and put contractual arrangements in place; the need to increase our team numbers so we have coverage in all EPA regions; the importance of making stress management issues integral parts of all health and safety considerations; the need for ongoing national education on the purpose of the team, etc.). We've also learned a number of external lessons, probably the most important of which is the need to coordinate with other federal responding agencies. That need now is being addressed by the federal Interagency Safety and Health Coordinating Committee.

How do we sum up our experience?

Overall, we've concluded that it was a good first deployment. We've gotten

enough positive feedback from the EPA shuttle responders that we can feel we definitely provided a needed and useful service. Our new team got some valuable field experience and the opportunity to test itself. We've made some steps forward in gaining more acceptance and credibility among the population we serve. We've also identified numerous areas in need of improvement. What more can any new team ask from its first time out?

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Out and About

Below is a tentative schedule* of industry conferences and trade shows where ICISF will be exhibiting "in the coming months. If you'll be attending one of these shows, be sure to stop by and say hi!

April 2-4, 2004

2004 ACA Annual Convention
Kansas City, MO

April 14-18, 2004

ATSS 12th Annual Conference on
Traumatic Stress -
Vancouver, BC, Canada

April 18-20, 2004

National Disaster Medical System
2004 Conference- Dallas, TX

April 24-28, 2004

Association of Professional
Chaplains Annual Conference-
Dallas, TX

April 25-27, 2004

NASW-NJ 2004 Annual
Conference- Atlantic City, NJ

April 29-May 2, 2004

CAMFT 40th Annual Conference-
Los Angeles, CA

May 12-15, 2004

Family Support America's 10th
Biennial National Conference-
Chicago, IL

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CISM and the Recovery of the Space Shuttle Columbia

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just came to sit and talk. Working as a team with the responders allows us to provide better peer support and crisis intervention, which is always our goal.

Acknowledgments

No discussion about the CISM response to the shuttle disaster would be complete without acknowledging the groups who helped make this operation a success. Some of the groups helping in this endeavor include: The City of College Station, Dallas Fire Department, Arlington Police Department, Fort Worth Fire Department, Fort Worth ISD, Tarrant County Crisis Response, Lone Star CISM Team, the Texas State Crisis Consortium, Texas Dept. of MHMR, DPS Victims Assistance, Texas CISM Network, Bluebonnet CISM Team, Southeast Texas

CISM Team, South Channel Bay Area CISM Team, Louisiana CISM, Permian Basin CISM Team and Midland Fire Dept.

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