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Therapist Led Quick Response to Terror

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By HOLDEN

HOLDEN -- As David Hollis watched the tragedy of the former Worcester Cold Storage and Warehouse Co. fire unfold in December 1999, he was overcome with a need to do something.

"I went down to the Red Cross and signed on as a volunteer for the first time in my life," said Mr. Hollis, a licensed psychotherapist at Jewish Family Service in Worcester. When terrorists struck on Sept. 11, the 21-year mental health professional became immediately involved.

As coordinator of the mental health team for the American Red Cross of Central Massachusetts, Mr. Hollis first put together a network of services for area residents who had lost family members in the tragedy. Then the Holden resident began a 12-day volunteer disaster relief assignment in Manhattan.

While in New York, Mr. Hollis was selected to lead the debriefing sessions for a team of 57 Red Cross mental health workers and other volunteers who are providing continuing services to family members of the victims of the terrorist attacks, as well as to those who lost their jobs because of the catastrophe. The group is based at a family assistance center at Pier 94 in Manhattan. Debriefing means formal, structured discussions that provide critical emotional unwinding for those involved in a disaster or other stressful work.

Mr. Hollis was also picked to play a major role in the Oct. 28 national memorial service for victims. He was among those who presented families with American flags and special urns containing material from the disaster site. He also accompanied the families on a tour of the site.

"I feel privileged to have participated in the whole experience -- locally and in New York. I don't have the words to describe being with the families at this sacred burial ground. I truly felt honored," Mr. Hollis said.

While at the site with the victim's families, he said, rescue workers stopped working and stood by quietly, out of respect for the families.

"I was struck by the utter silence, the smell of burning metal, the still smoldering ruins and the view of the Statue of Liberty in the distance," Mr. Hollis said.

The memorial service occurred on his first day in New York and involved families from throughout the country.

"It was a very intense emotional experience," Mr. Hollis said. At day's end, he said, "I had to seek out debriefing for myself ... that level of intensity is stressful even for the most seasoned clinician."

Mr. Hollis said he was compelled to go to New York after working with victim families in this area. He rearranged his personal schedule to go, and Jewish Family Service granted him paid leave during his volunteer assignment. The experience, he said, will allow him to connect with the families in the Worcester area at a more meaningful level. The Red Cross is providing services to about 20 families who lost loved ones in New York, Mr. Hollis said.

"Dave is an exceptional clinician. We felt that there were people that could benefit from his skills," said Stephen Slaten, executive director of Jewish Family Service.

The agency was very aware that Central Massachusetts was not as directly affected by the tragedy as were other parts of the nation. "In some ways, it was our contribution to allow him to go where the need was the greatest," Mr. Slaten said.

The approach used to counsel families in New York was very different from what he is used to, Mr. Hollis said. For example, there were no set appointments when clients came specifically for counseling, no specific issues to define the sessions. Families and others came to the Pier 94 center for a host of services; counseling was not necessarily on the list.

"We had to approach families and we had to do it in a caring way. We would assess whether they were really interested in having a conversation. You didn't want them to talk to you because you needed them to talk to you," he said. It was not uncommon to meet with a family only once. Some sessions lasted 10 minutes, others extended to 90 minutes.

"This was very different. We were all traumatized; this was a nationally shared experience. It was new ground. We were dealing with our own emotions, fears, sadness, anger, and anxieties right along with them," Mr. Hollis said. There were times, he said, when he needed to distance himself from clients, to prevent being overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of the situation.

"Probably what we offered was a place to share their story; a place to let down their guard," Mr. Hollis said. The counselors, he said, were good listeners.

"We let them know it was OK to be enraged; to feel so much grief that you can't imagine going on. We helped them kind of look at what is going to help them take the next step so they won't feel helpless," Mr. Hollis added.

Mr. Hollis said the families he talked with were at very different stages. Some, he said were still in shock -- numb, and not ready to share their experience. Others were angry, focused on wanting justice. But, he said, most of the families were ready to deal with their sadness.

It was six to eight weeks after the tragedy, Mr. Hollis noted, and most were starting to grieve. Families were interested in talking about their loved ones -- not only how they had died but, more often, about their relationships with their loved ones. They also shared photos.

"I saw a lot of strength. That was reassuring for me. I saw family members who showed a lot of resilience," Mr. Hollis said.

ART: PHOTOS

PHOTO: (2)T&G Staff/ MARK C. IDE

CUTLINE: (1)Mr. Hollis; (2)David Hollis of Holden, a mental health professional who volunteered in New York City in the aftermath of the Trade Center tragedy, holds a Red Cross shirt.