

# Chaplaincy provides spiritual support in critical stress management

by Rob Dewey

Critical Stress Management (CSM) is a term that most of us who are either EMS practitioners or other first responders, or who support EMS practitioners, have become familiar with in the last decade. In the 1970s, I was a police officer and volunteer member of the Black Mountain, N.C., Rescue Squad. We were told to keep our emotions in check, and not to show weakness. This probably sounds very familiar.

Thankfully, those days are over. Through a CSM system, several types of support are available to EMS practitioners and their families. On the forefront of this movement was the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation ([www.icisf.org](http://www.icisf.org)), which was founded in 1982. One of the now endorsed CSM support avenues is Pastoral Crisis Intervention. I was honored to be one of the co-authors of the two Pastoral Crisis Intervention Courses offered through the ICISF and the University of Maryland – Baltimore Campus.

I also am blessed that in 1990, the Lord shared a vision with me to begin a full-time Chaplain's program – the Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy. This ministry is for EMS practitioners and other first responders, their families and victims of crime. In 2010, we responded to some 1,550 emergency calls offering

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on-scene support to EMS practitioners and others.

It is key to offer the appropriate support following a traumatic call. If this support is not offered, the likeli-

hood exists that stress will build up, which could potentially lead to stress that can be life-changing, i.e., post-traumatic stress disorder. The Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy serves 36 agencies; one of the major agencies that we are honored to serve is the Charleston County EMS.

NAEMT President-elect and Charleston County EMS Director Don Lundy states, "In our business, we are always focused on the patient. Many times, a co-worker may become a de-facto patient because of what they see and experience on the job. We use the Chaplaincy for issues that an employee may come up against, but may not want to talk with their employer about. This is a very complicated world, and many members of our EMS family experience a multitude of issues that, if not caught and worked out early, end up affecting both their jobs and our patient care."

## Spiritual support in action

Over these 20 years, I have been requested to respond to various situations with EMS practitioners who have experienced loss. One time concerned when a medic was relieved of duty. A supervisor called me and stated that they were concerned for his safety, as he felt the fired employee may harm himself. I found him living in a his car. I asked him to go with me to talk with a professional counselor. He said he would meet me after he visited his father's grave; I told him that was not going to be an option, and he did go with me and received some much-needed help.

Some EMS systems utilize chaplains as a resource for their personnel. Some of these chaplains are local clergy, who serve the agency as a volunteer. Several agencies have full-time chaplains, as we do at the Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy, which is a non-profit ministry. We have four full-time staff, 15 volunteer chaplains and a Board of Directors (which Don Lundy has faithfully served for seven years).

Whether a clergyperson is serving an EMS agency as a volunteer or as a full-time chaplain, it is an honor to serve in this ministry with the community of EMS practitioners and other first responders. On a regular basis, a chaplain is requested to meet a crew at the emergency room following a particularly bad run, such as one involving a baby or another EMS worker. By offering a 'Ministry of Presence' every day, I pray we are making a difference in the lives of the EMS practitioners, their families and the agency.

Providing pastoral support as part of the Critical Stress Management system for our EMS personnel is so very important. Lundy comments that "The Coastal Crisis Chaplaincy has been the foundation for our 'spiritual division.' While some might think of a Chaplaincy as a Bible-carrying group, this Chaplaincy ministry for us is a part of the EMS team which offers a spiritual presence for our co-workers. I cannot think of where we would be if we did not have this group with us. They have saved quite a number of lives, marriages and families within our system."

I encourage you to contact me if I may be of assistance to your agency in either developing a Chaplaincy program or helping to maintain this ministry.

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