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# Training program helps first responders cope with aftermath of trauma

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**By Julia Bergman (/apps/pbcs.dll/personalia?ID=j.bergman)**

Salem — The Riverside Trauma Center has trained community volunteers, clergy members, and the grandma in the neighborhood who happens to be connected with everyone.

"Because that's the person that people are going to want to sit and talk with," said Larry Berkowitz, program director at the Riverside Trauma Center, based in Needham, Mass.

Berkowitz and Sarah Gaer, the suicide prevention specialist for the center, led a two-day trauma training program for 38 people — from educators to counselors to first responders — at the Gardner Lake Fire Department Monday and Tuesday. The program focused on psychological first aid, a one-to-one response following a crisis situation designed to identify the needs of those impacted and to help stabilize them, and post-traumatic stress management.

"A lot of this is about how we help people re-establish their routines, stabilize, and move through a really tough time," Berkowitz said after Monday's portion of the training, which focused on psychological first aid.

The training, which cost \$7,500, was paid for by the Southeastern Regional Action Council, which was established by the Connecticut General Assembly in 1989 to help communities address the problems of substance abuse and addiction. The idea was to improve the crisis response system in southeastern Connecticut. Council members would like to create a regional team in the area to respond to crisis situations.

While SERAC paid for the training, it was hosted by Salem and the Gardner Lake Volunteer Fire Department.

Ed Chmielewski, a SERAC board member, said this training had only been done once before in Connecticut, in Enfield.

"To be able to send a team in to respond to a crisis after the dust has settled is a huge asset to our local towns," Chmielewski said. He added that there was no specific event that triggered the training but rather the result of the totality of the recent events.

"It's nice as a community to be proactive rather than reactive," he said.

Some of the information that the participants learned Monday was about the history of psychological trauma and the steps to take when responding to that type of trauma. As a training exercise, participants were presented with a scenario of a murder-suicide of a teacher at her home. The murder was suspected to be carried out by her husband, who later committed suicide. Participants had to take turns being those who responded to a counseling center for those impacted by the tragedy, and those who were impacted and were seeking counseling and information.

"People usually assume that it's a therapist that's doing this kind of work or social worker, or psychologist, or mental health counselor," Berkowitz said.

Karen Fischer, a prevention coordinator at Lymes' Youth Service Bureau, a social services organization for children and families in Lyme and Old Lyme, took part in the two-day training.

"Having been a therapist, you're used to having a relationship whereas this is coming in cold," Fischer said after Monday's training was over.

But Fischer is no stranger to helping after a tragedy. She worked with 9-11 survivors from the Pentagon in the Washington, D.C., area who'd been struggling to cope with the tragedy for five years, she said.

"One woman said when she came to our group that she had to sit next to an exit," Fischer said. "Simple things like that to help make people feel safe in the present."

She said she thought the training was "fantastic."

"It's something that I would like to see a whole lot of people trained in," she continued.

Gardner Lake Fire Department Chief Jim Savale said he plans to have all of his volunteer firefighters go through the training in the fall. Savale said the department received a federal grant several years ago to help them identify those within their ranks who may need help following a "bad call" — after responding to a difficult situation.

Chmielewski said following the training, SERAC and other officials will discuss the steps that need to be taken in order to create a regional response team.

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