
The Role Of The American Red Cross In Aviation Disasters

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Abstract

The American Red Cross is internationally recognized as the leader in disaster relief, but less well known is its role in providing psychological support services to those impacted by disasters, ranging from single family fires to mass fatality incidents. The American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health program is comprised of licensed or certified mental health professionals, trained to provide the effective, appropriate interventions in the highly chaotic, emotional charged environment that frequently surrounds a disaster. These skills are even more valued after aviation disasters.

In the fall of 1996, the Congress of the United States passed the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act, which gave the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) the responsibility to oversee support services to families of passengers involved in commercial aviation disasters in the United States and its territories. The NTSB then tasked the American Red Cross with the role of coordinating emotional support services to those involved in aviation disasters.

Since that time, the American Red Cross has developed a specialized Aviation Incident Response Team (AIR), with the capability and responsibility to travel anywhere in the US within four hours of an incident.

A key component of the AIR Team is the Red Cross mental health leadership team which works closely with local professionals in the impacted area, as well as clergy, to ensure that appropriate support is available for affected families as well as disaster workers around the clock. Central to meeting the needs of the families is insuring they have a private area in which to grieve, while awaiting information about the crash, and identification of their loved ones. Usually family members are sequestered in a hotel near the crash site, where they can develop mutual support systems, while waiting for information.

Aviation disasters are not unlike other mass casualty events,

in that there is usually a tremendous outpouring of volunteers who wish to contribute their services to help those grieving. Though well meaning, these volunteers can quickly overwhelm those they are trying to help. The Red Cross has developed a system to manage this inflow of volunteers. A Staff Processing Center (SPC) is often set up in or near the relief operations headquarters. All volunteer and paid staff must process in and out of this center. Licenses and credentials are checked, volunteers are screened for appropriate assignment and availability, and all staff are given an orientation specific to the incident, including self care guidance. Once workers have been screened and given an orientation, they are assigned to specific service delivery sites, and given an ID specific to that site to ensure that security is maintained. The majority of mental health volunteers will find themselves assigned to the Family Assistance Center. Services may range from basic comfort measures, to grief counseling, education, and information about the recovery and identification process, support through the ante- and post-mortem interviews, assistance arranging appropriate memorial services, and referral to support groups specific to aviation disasters. Other services for family members include child and spiritual support. These programs are provided in collaboration with Red Cross, and are comprised of specially trained child care workers and chaplains who represent a broad range of religious and spiritual backgrounds. Red Cross services may also extend to those working at the recovery site, and other locations where workers may be assigned as part of the response.

The Red Cross works closely with other agencies and organizations to ensure that everyone involved has access to support services including Critical Incident Stress Debriefing as part of an overall Critical Incident Stress Management program. Red Cross mental health services are not limited to

families who choose to come to the disaster site, but are provided to affected families around the country, who, for their own reasons may not choose to, or be able to travel to the crash site. Mental health volunteers from their local chapters will reach out to provide similar support, ensuring the same quality of care. These local volunteers will also provide follow up support to families returning home after the crash.

The American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health program continues to expand in new directions, from support to individual families affected by single family disasters to aviation disasters, so that the same level of support is provided to people affected by traumatic events around the country and around the world. The Red Cross is ready whenever and wherever needed.

References

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