

From the President



Post Trauma

By RICK MATTOS
CAHP President

The Critical Incident. The Big Trauma. That Big Event in your life that has left you screwed up for a long time now. How do we deal with that? The CHP has an Employee Assistance Unit that has been busy of late providing help for critical incidents. Generally, when the big one goes down, CHP will hold a "Critical Incident Debriefing." These debriefings are designed to let everyone talk through their perceptions of the incident and how it affected each of them. Sometimes the incident hits harder than that. Sometimes, for whatever reason, there is no debriefing. What happens then? In the old days, we learned to "walk it off." Often those memories were left to fester until they came back out in our lives in the form of heart attacks, alcoholism and broken families. That doesn't have to happen anymore. The help is out there and it is getting easier to find.

Recently I was honored to be allowed to view one of these resources from the inside. I spent a week working as a peer at the West Coast Post Trauma Retreat (WCPR).

The WCPR was founded in 1999 by a group of Northern California

law enforcement, fire services and emergency medical services (EMS) peers, and a chaplain who wanted to help emergency workers who bear the scars of their professions. In the 25 sessions they have put on so far, they have helped people from several states and countries.

I discovered that CHP officers have been discreetly attending for some time now. At this session there were six "clients" representing as many different agencies. As I watched the six sitting in silence I was reminded of the expressions seen on the faces of victims of disasters or soldiers who have spent too much time on the battlefield. Their eyes would stare into the distance and they did not interact with anyone.

The process started almost immediately with testing and evaluations. The critical incidents were probed and the past was uncovered. Individual time with clinicians is mixed with group time and educational elements to provide full days that ran up to 15 hours broken by occasional breaks and outstanding food prepared by volunteers.

As the days went on I started to see the magic unfold. Gradually the eyes began to sparkle and senses of humor began to appear. The peers began

to interact with the five officers and one firefighter, peers picked because of their traits in common with the others. When one of the officers began to withdraw, he was confronted by several people and told that wouldn't be allowed. He would be kept company wherever he went; he needed to talk. He promised to avoid isolating himself and the next day thanked everyone

but reminded them he could go to the bathroom by himself.

An educational session on alcohol and drugs was followed by an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where hard truths were realized and new goals were set. On Friday, I saw a different set of six individuals. Smiles,

conversations and plans for the future replaced the sullen faces that walked in the door less than a week earlier.

I could write pages and pages on what I saw that week but space prohibits it. Besides, I want to spend time on two particular aspects of this program. The first is the confidentiality. First names are used, written nondisclosure forms are signed, and those answering the phone will not acknowledge the presence of any of the clients. The location of the retreat is not revealed and anyone wandering in is confronted immediately. The information that comes out of the

sessions remains confidential.

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The second, and perhaps most important aspect, is the nature of the personnel involved in the retreat. All are volunteers. Most have been through the program before and have returned to help others. Because they all have an emergency worker connection, there is an

immediate level of trust. Along with the trust is the fact they will see right through any attempt to hold back or be less than truthful. I think the workers are the backbone of this operation. There cannot be the claim that, "you don't know what it's like." These people do know. Not only that but they are there only because they know what it's like and want to help others get past the trauma.

The help doesn't end on Friday either. Each of the clients left with a plan. The plan had goals and dates the goals would be met. Each of them also had a peer who will check on them to make sure they are adhering to their plan. I saw six lives reclaimed and set back on a path to good health. As I heard someone say, "Their leaky boats have been patched up and they can now set sail again."

If you or someone you know might benefit from this program, contact the West Coast Post Trauma Retreat at www.wcpr2001.org, call them, (415) 721- 9789, or call me and I'll help you out.