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Southern California Wildfires: There Are Giants Among Us

By Nancy K. Bohl, PhD

There are giants among us. They fight fire, they control traffic, they guard our scarred neighborhoods, they provide peer support, they provide spiritual support, and they provide mental health support. All of them struggled to return our communities back to normalcy after the wildfires in California.

The Counseling Team International (TCTI) is The Southern California Critical Incident Stress Management Team. Since it was founded in 1983, TCTI has provided psychological services to government agencies, private industries and to a variety of organizations in the state of California, as well as nationwide. Many of these agencies include Law Enforcement and Fire Departments. We have responded to several major disasters, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the Unabomber case in Sacramento, Hurricane Andrew in Florida, TWA flight 800 in New York, the Los Angeles riots, the ATF incident in Waco Texas, the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton Colorado, the two San Diego County school shootings and most recently, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September of 2001. We have responded to many others, but nothing could have prepared us to have, in our own back yards, the worst disaster in the state of California.

The wildfires of October 2003 were absolutely devastating to Southern California. There were about eight different fires burning simultaneously. It was amazing to watch the news and

have them tell you that a fire started and another fire started and then they would update us on another fire starting. It felt like everything was going to burn down. As a team, we weren't just worried about all of our friends and family members that were evacuated and for those who lost their homes. In addition, we were worried about some of our own team members at TCTI—three of our team members were evacuated and two were relocated for awhile. We were now dealing with our own worries and concerns for our own. Ordinarily, we travel to disasters that are not in our own communities. This time it was different. The majority of the firestorms that engulfed California in October of 2003 tested our ability to respond and also tested the entire critical incident stress management process. Proudly, I can state that both persevered. TCTI is a group of Mental Health Professionals, Chaplains and Peer Supporters that live throughout Southern California and who believe in the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation's (ICISF) Critical Incident Stress Management program (CISM).

In San Bernardino County alone, the Grand Prix, the Old Fire and the Playground Fire destroyed 151,000 acres. There were 1,100 homes lost, 156,835 people were evacuated along with 700 animals. Six civilians lost their lives. In San Diego County, there were two major fires—the Paradise fire, and the Cedar fire, which was the larger of

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the two. San Diego County had 280,278 acres burned. There were 2,232 structures totally destroyed, as well as 22 commercial buildings and 566 out buildings. There were 13 civilians killed, 107 injuries and one firefighter fatality. By understanding these statistics, it may be easier to grasp the scope of the CISM response needed.

Since TCTI provides services throughout both of these counties we were called by many agencies to provide support. There was the United States Forestry Service, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, all the local law enforcement agencies, the school districts, the federal government, many private industries whose employees lost their homes, county employees, hospitals and the list goes on and on. This article will focus on San Diego County, where most of our CISM services were rendered.

San Diego County was well prepared for this disaster, in terms of understanding the impact of disasters and how to respond. In the year prior to the wildfires, they had received CISM training provided by TCTI. The training consisted of *CISM: Group Crisis Intervention* (ICISF), Advanced CISM (TCTI) and how to use a disaster manual (TCTI). Being exposed to the CISM process really made a significant difference for the county's responders. Linda Cannon, Mental Health Services Disaster Coordinator, was responsible for implementing this training. Little did she know her proactive ideas would make such a difference in so many lives.

TCTI received a call from Linda Cannon requesting that we respond and assist those county employees

who were out in the trenches providing support to the people in the devastated communities. Again Linda recognized the need for organizing outside resources, as she had when she previously arranged for and implemented CISM training for her staff. Her people were overwhelmed, overworked and exhausted. They needed a break. Plus, their regular responsibilities at work, i.e. caseloads, clients, heavy schedules, etc. did not disappear just because the firestorms came. They were expected to handle both. These Mental Health workers were dedicated to helping everyone, but as time went on, it was harder for them to complete all of their regular responsibilities at work. They did, however, pave the way for TCTI to step in and help alleviate their schedules. It was beneficial to everyone involved that the County of San Diego recognized the need for crisis counseling beyond the scope of services offered by the county mental health system.

When we received the call we began to organize our teams. We refer to our teams as Critical Incident Response Teams (CIRT). TCTI has always believed in the concept called, "The Helping Triad". Whether we are going to be providing support by conducting critical incident stress debriefings or canvassing a devastated community, we prefer to work as a team. Each CIRT consists of a mental health professional (MHP), a peer supporter and also a chaplain. We tried to organize our teams during the firestorms in this fashion. Many of the peer supporters were law enforcement officers who had been trained in the TCTI Basic Peer Support course and had also been trained in ICISF's *CISM: Group*

Crisis Intervention course. Their departments allowed them to take time off to assist and also gave them vacation time so they could respond to the firestorms. The chaplains also had prior training in TCTI's Basic Peer Support course and had completed ICISF's *CISM: Group Crisis Intervention* course. It really makes a difference if everyone has the same training and the same philosophy about CISM.

Having a prior working relationship with your team members helps the entire CISM program go more smoothly. Most of us had trained together so we understood each other. It was also important to have a prior relationship with the police and fire department administrators who were willing to send their peer support personnel to assist. The Law Enforcement peers helped relate to those individuals who were in the same line of work. For example: Sgt. Errol Bechtel, from the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, is the peer support coordinator for their department. He not only organized his team members to respond with TCTI, but he also was able to talk to those deputies in San Diego County who were reluctant to interact with non-sworn team members. He did this with ease, opening the door for more contact from non-sworn members. It was the same for our fire and dispatch peer supporters.

Before we began to deploy our team members, we sent a representative, Bonnie Spitzer from TCTI, to be our project manager. She manages our entire organization and fulfills the role of peer support coordinator as well. She has completed TCTI's Basic Peer Support course as well as the ICISF

CISM: Group Crisis Intervention course. She was the liaison between TCTI and San Diego County throughout the firestorm, receiving the information we needed for our team to deploy. They requested she attend all meetings relative to the CISM programs for their communities, which lasted for several weeks. These meetings involved FEMA, Red Cross, San Diego County and many more agencies. Attending these meetings became Bonnie's primary responsibility, thereby necessitating the creation of a new position at TCTI headquarters to dispatch and monitor the teams who were in the field providing support.

Brenda Hulsey filled this new position. It was set up as a command post to prevent any type of confusion for our CIRT members. All information regarding CISM filtered into and out of this one command post. Brenda arranged all the CIRT members' travel, lodging (if necessary) and meals. She would also set up the daily schedule of services for each member in order to insure adequate staffing of our teams.

A separate command post was organized and run by Linda Cannon. At this command post, which met every morning at 7:00 am, each CIRT would be given their assignment. Included in their assignment packages were maps, written directions, handouts and hours to be available. During the morning meetings, any special concerns from the previous day were also discussed. Linda also assigned a team leader for each team. Forms were passed out so each CIRT would keep track of their daily contacts. Appropriate ID's were given so there

wouldn't be any problems going into the disaster site.

As the director of TCTI, I have always stressed that you must be flexible if you are going to provide CISM services. A disaster assignment can change within minutes. Many times what you envision doing is not the way it turns out. The key is to go with the flow.

The beauty of ICISF's CISM model is that it teaches you to do just that—be flexible, go into your toolbox and look at the variety of options you have available in the intervention process. ICISF has been teaching for years that debriefings are not the only way you can provide support. Responding to the wildfires, our CIRT members clearly understood why this is so important to remember.

The TCTI CIRT members were primarily sent to the county mental health evacuation shelters as well as to the federal emergency local assistance centers (FELAC). There were many different agencies at these centers, which were spread throughout the devastated areas. All the people impacted by the firestorms could receive assistance from every agency possible. This was not the ideal environment for conducting debriefings. Our teams did what they thought was best for everyone involved. They positively impacted people by walking around. They would stop and talk to people inside the centers, outside the centers and to people in the parking lot. Many put on their walking shoes and went out into the neighborhoods savaged by the fires. We knocked on doors, passed out pamphlets and gave referral information. The county set up a crisis hotline for people to call

in case they were in a crisis and needed to talk to a MHP right away. The American Red Cross gave us coloring books and gloves to pass out. They also gave us water. Handing water to those people who were rummaging through a pile of rubble, which only days before had been their home, was an opportunity to make contact in a non-threatening manner. This created a safe way for an individual devastated by the fires to begin sharing their feelings and thoughts with the CIRT members. What a wonderful way to reach out.

As time went on, the demand for CISM services increased for TCTI. We have on-going commitments to over 100 agencies, which began to call us for debriefings as well. We were not able to handle this demand, so I called ICISF and received immediate support from Executive Director Don Howell. He was responsive and extremely helpful to us. He gave me names of ICISF trained clinicians, chaplains and peers. From this list, we were able to access qualified, ICISF trained people. What a great resource this was to all of us.

Basically this was our experience in helping with the civilians. The police and fire personnel were a different story. The departments set up formalized debriefings for their personnel. It took quite a few weeks for that to occur with the exception of the death of Steven Rucker.

Steven was killed on October 29, 2003. He was on Engine Company E6162 in Novato Fire Protection District as part of a strike team. A fire overran his strike team while they were trying to protect a residential structure in the very small

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community of Wynola. Steven died from his injuries and three other firefighters were injured. They were air lifted to the University of San Diego burn center. Two TCTI staff members, Dr. Piero D'Ingillo and Bill Thompson (former fire captain) assisted in debriefing the firefighters that were impacted by Steven Rucker's death. The experience these two staffers had was incredible, for they had an opportunity to work with a wonderful group of firefighters. Although debriefings were necessary and helpful, our staffers felt that going with the firefighters to the place where Steven died was also healing for his co-workers. They all went to the structure, stood together and participated in a prayer for Steven Rucker and his family. This proved to be a moving and important part of the CISM process. Bill Thompson also attended Steven Rucker's funeral.

After the fires we continued to provide support for about six to eight weeks. Everyone was exhausted. We had a break until the floods came. This also turned out to be devastating to our Southern California communities. The floods that hit San Bernardino County once again taxed our firefighters and Law Enforcement personnel, and of course our CIRT members who had worked the fires. Many people died from the floods, which meant search and rescue teams and search dog teams were involved. We were asked to provide CISM services for these two groups as well, along with many others.

At this point, our CIRT members were feeling a bit stretched and overwhelmed, wondering if we could continue to provide the on-

going support expected of us. Knowing that other incidents might occur in the immediate or more distant future, we found comfort in the knowledge that we could access others trained by ICISF if we needed assistance.

In summary, do not forget the importance of preparing your CIRT members for a disaster response. It is a different animal than the day-to-day events CIRT members usually respond too. Training before a disaster strikes your community can help prevent chaos. The CISM concept provides a variety of services, not just defusings or debriefings.

CIRT members may be asked to interact in areas and with populations with whom they have no experience. In a disaster, be prepared to help with the homeless, war veterans, refugees, seasonal migrant workers, the seriously mentally ill, the seriously emotionally disturbed, the medically fragile, those with a history of substance abuse, non-English speaking residences, persons with disabilities, those unemployed or now potentially unemployed. In the case of last year's California wildfires, all of these populations were impacted.

Have available on your teams a bilingual member. In San Diego County, this was necessary because so many of the people impacted in these 16 communities were Spanish speaking.

Make sure your team leaders monitor the CIRT members. Having been involved in many disasters over my career, it is true that not everyone knows when to take a break and refuel. Also, allowing all CIRT members an opportunity to debrief during early morning command post meetings, late night dinners, or some

similar gathering, is paramount to the mental health of the members.

The California wildfires caused unprecedented devastation. Because of many dedicated EMS, fire and police personnel, more tragedy was prevented. They fought valiantly to prevent any more loss of life. My thanks and tribute goes to all of the law enforcement and fire personnel that fought these fires. I also want to thank the MHPs from TCTI and the counties of San Diego and San Bernardino, the peer supporters and the chaplains who made a difference to those that were impacted by the disaster. In addition, I thank ICISF for their constant support. And I especially want to honor firefighter Steven Rucker and his memory. He was truly one of the giants among us!

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She has responded to more than 800 officer involved shooting incidents, and assisted in the aftermath of the following disasters: TWA Flight 800, the Alaska Air Disaster, the Unabomber incident, Oklahoma City bombing, school shootings in Springfield, Oregon, Littleton, Colorado and San Diego, California, as well as the Terrorist Attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Dr. Bohl is a Reserve Deputy and a trained hostage negotiator. She is a frequent guest speaker at the FBI Academy, Police Academies throughout the nation, and is a trainer for ICISF and the Law Enforcement Wellness Association. ■