

Consolation in catastrophe

Victim services volunteers on the front lines of fires, murders, crashes

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The Holland Sentinel

Posted Feb 14, 2010 @ 05:32 AM

Holland, MI — When a house fire claimed the lives of a mother and her child in Lee Township on Oct. 8, Shawn Hohman arrived on the scene while the house was still smoking. Even as the firefighters worked to extinguish the blaze, the president of the Allegan County Victim Services Unit, was working to help put the pieces together for the grieving family.

The group of 13 men and women in victim services offer initial support to people involved in fires, traffic crashes, shootings and murders in the 827-square-mile county doling out comfort, funeral home information and grief resources.

“It’s a terrible situation — it’s a good response to people on the worst day of their lives,” Hohman said.

Helping others

Allegan and Ottawa counties and Holland city each have a victim services unit.

“They’re a tremendous asset to law enforcement,” said Ottawa County Sheriff’s Office Lt. Lee Hoeksema.

Allegan County Sheriff Blaine Koops said the volunteers of the group formed in 2001 are an invaluable resource.

“These are citizens who have committed to help those people who are under the extreme emotional stress that accompanies the death, serious injury of family members or victims of crime,” he said.

The volunteers make sure victims and family members aren’t ignored when police officers are busy investigating the scene or getting a blaze under control.

“They come in and help soothe the situation,” said Hoeksema, who is in his third year as coordinator of the 25-member team.

The victim services members — they always work in twos for safety and support — are meant for short-term immediate assistance for people on the scene, according to Allegan County Detective Chris Haverdink, who works with the Allegan victim services volunteers.

They have contact numbers for services the people might need, from the Red Cross and domestic violence shelters to how to get a police or court report or autopsy results.

“Some last 30 minutes,” Haverdink said about encounters with victims. “Some are all day long.”

They are called to the scene of an incident through central dispatch.

“Our goal is to be out of our home and on the road in 15 minutes,” added Hoeksema.

Special people

All three victim service teams follow the same basic training.

Volunteers are screened and interviewed. They receive up to 40 hours of training and attend monthly meetings with their peers.

They are on call for shifts as long as 12 hours, responding across their counties or city in snow and rain, night or day and holidays.

The volunteers don't have to have any special background. Participants are retired school teachers, nurses and pastors.

"It takes a very special person to be in this group," Haverdink said.

For Yvette Mendoza, the program coordinator of Holland's victim service unit that started in 1997, her desire to help came from personal experience. She lost two children about 20 years ago and didn't have victim services to assist her.

"I know how worthwhile that would have been to have," she said.

Hohman, who's been with the Allegan unit for eight years, said she wanted to find a way to help people.

Caroline, who asked that her last name not be used for reasons of confidentiality, wanted to make a difference in someone's life

"I love it, I really do," she said. "When I leave, I've helped someone. It's the best feeling in the world."