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Scenes like this one haunt emergency workers' dreams – but a local group is helping bring them back into the light.

Rescuing the rescuers

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By Neal Ross

Emergency responders routinely lose sleep over the public's nightmares.

Sonoma Valley's firefighters, EMTs and paramedics -- many of them unpaid volunteers -- stand by 24 hours a day, ready to roll at a moment's notice and bring order to often-horrible chaos.

But sometimes they lose sleep for a different reason. Children die, or are badly hurt by people they trust. Fires and accidents result in grisly injuries or fatalities. And in a small place like the Valley, those in the emergency-response field can find themselves working on friends, neighbors and even colleagues.

This unrelieved raw-reality dose can take a terrible toll, ranging from fatigue and irritability to alcohol abuse. So a dozen years ago, three people decided to do something about it -- and the North Bay Regional Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team was born.

"We had this grandiose idea that it would be great to have some sort of peer effort to help emergency personnel -- (people who have) 'been there, done that,' and know what it's all about," says co-founder and program coordinator Erica Beedle.

Beedle makes a distinction between the day-to-day stress of emergency work, and the "critical incidents" which go above and beyond normal human experience -- "anything that chips through that armor that we put on to go out and do this job."

Team member and Kenwood safety officer Richard Gulson describes critical incidents in a March 1999 CISM report to the Sonoma County Fire Districts Association: "The gory traffic accident, the suicide, the (sudden infant death), a death caused by fire, the death or injury of a friend or colleague. A long, drawn-out exhausting response that doesn't end well. Or it may be the last in a string of ghastly similar incidents ... (or) a new father or mother responding to a sick or injured baby."

"The majority of us adore what we do ... but you can get burned out and grumpy and just kind of lose your way," Beedle says. "On the most part, emergency service workers are incredibly healthy. But what happens is, you see the underbelly of society daily ... (which) most people don't know unless they're watching a movie -- not when it's at home and real."

For that reason, the roughly 30-member CISM team is composed of people from all walks of emergency life -- firefighting, law enforcement, medical personnel and dispatchers. The "defusings and debriefings" are anonymous gatherings: no names are asked or given, nobody has to talk unless they want to, nothing is written down.

Sonoma Fire Chief Mike Cahill, an active supporter of the all-volunteer effort, says the team's talk-it-out approach "really has only become an accepted practice in the last five or 10 years."

"Prior to that ... if you were in this line of work, you accepted (stress) as the price you pay for being in those environments where people are killed or injured," Cahill says. "I think we always expected people would package that up and put it behind them. The unfortunate thing is, they'd take it home with them ... and it would manifest itself in unhealthy ways."

Beedle says that's not surprising, given that emergency professions -- almost by definition -- attract people with controlling, perfectionist personalities.

"They're always second-guessing themselves," Beedle explains. "...You take the most perfect call in the whole wide world, and they'll be trying to figure out how they could have done it better."

But while such dedication may be admirable, it also has its drawbacks.

"It takes a lot out of your family, especially for (volunteer firefighters)," Beedle says. "You're jumping up from the dinner table and they're wondering, 'Okay, who's more important here?'"

Cahill recalls a time in 1983, when he and then-Chief Al Mazza were Sonoma's only paid firefighters.

"We would be the first ones on the scene of everything," Cahill says. "I remember that wearing thin on me, with a cumulative effect ... I personally got to the point where I didn't want to go to calls -- it was really hard."

"In retrospect, if the (CISM) system had been in place, I probably would have dealt with it better than I did," he says. "The sooner that involved individuals sit down and deal with (stress), keep it from becoming insidious ... the better off you are in dealing with stuff."

Beedle, a former Richmond paramedic who worked briefly for Sonoma's Norrbom Ambulance company -- "I went from crack houses to cows" -- says the CISM team handles an average of three critical incident defusings and debriefings every month around the North Bay, with hundreds of less-formal contacts during the same period. She'd like to see the program eventually expand to every fire and police department, to "give everyone someone to talk to."

That's exactly what started the local CISM team 12 years ago, Beedle explains. She recalls that emergency workers in need of solace would drop by then-Twin Hills firefighter Harry J. Martin's office "for a bad cup of coffee" and a chat.

"Harry had been a chaplain -- it was a natural for him," Beedle says.

Along with Jennifer Hogerman, an ER nurse at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital, Beedle and Martin approached the Sonoma County powers-that-be with an eye toward creating a county-based CISM team. Beedle says the idea met with a lot of support -- including paid training for her and Martin by the Maryland-based International Critical Incident Stress Foundation.

"From there, we just started reaching out," Beedle says. "Over the years, we've been able to provide training for those who want to join ... We have probably 30 people on the team right now, with 20 active members -- but when the s---- hits the fan, we can call in others."

For example, following September's critical incident where 19-year-old Kenwood volunteer firefighter Brian Fletcher drove head-on into a tree and was rescued by his colleagues, CISM team members were able to meet the crews as they returned to the station.

But Beedle and Cahill say the CISM idea took a while to catch on, due in part to the prevailing "just deal with it" attitude.

"It was like, 'Why do you need that? I don't need that,'" Cahill says. "I can assure you that there were firefighters in this Valley that said 'Hey, no way.'"

"They're slowly but surely realizing that it's okay," Beedle says, adding that although the CISM idea spread more rapidly among firefighters than among police, the county sheriff's department now has 75 trained peers -- some 10 percent of its entire force.

"Honestly, throughout Sonoma County, we're pretty well accepted," Beedle says. "Of course, there are always individuals who feel that way."

Beedle points out that her team, operating under the aegis of Sonoma County Emergency Medical Services, is an entirely volunteer effort -- "This is all pro bono, nobody gets paid for it" -- and is one of 35 in California registered with the international foundation. That means the worldwide teams also support each other, as Beedle found out after getting a call during the recent East Coast floods.

"Trust me -- when the big icky nasty hits us, and we're wiped out, we'll put a call in back East and say, 'Send help,'" she says.

And help, Beedle says, is what the CISM team is all about.

"It's really important," she says. "... Nobody would ever think about putting out a piece of equipment if it's not 100 percent -- why would you want to do that with your people?"