

Catholic agency says caregivers of oil spill victims need attention too

CONVENT, La. - The haunting lyrics of the spiritual made famous by Louis Armstrong - "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen/Nobody knows but Jesus" - might be an apt job description for crisis counselors and case managers who daily commiserate with the south Louisiana fishing families harmed by the massive BP oil spill.

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans and its counselors and managers have made a concerted effort to provide mental health counseling to these families and individuals at five church sites.

But the agency also has learned from catastrophes such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina that "you have to care for the caregiver," said Dr. Elmore Rigamer, medical director of Catholic Charities.

That commitment to the caregiver was on display Sept. 20-22 at the Jesuit-run Manresa House of Retreats, which defrayed the cost of a three-day retreat for 28 Catholic Charities counselors and case managers who, since April, have been giving assistance to and consoling families whose livelihoods have been threatened by the spill.

If nothing else, the days of strolling on Manresa's lush grounds and sitting beneath the shade of expansive, centuries-old oak trees - mostly in silence - allowed the retreatants to relieve the stress of carrying so many others' burdens.

At one group session, during which the retreatants could respond to questions, one case manager told Rigamer, a psychiatrist: "I used to have a flame or a spark within me to help people, and that spark has burned out. I'm burned out."

"Of all the people, she needed to be here this week, and she took advantage of it," said Larry Carbo, a crisis counselor who worked for the New Orleans Fire Department for 30 years and now is a counselor with Catholic Charities. "I could see a change in her after a day or two. She's motivated now."

Carbo, his brother Gary and JoJo Rigney are all retired firefighters who, after Katrina, became counselors to first responders, following a model set up by the New York Fire Department after 9/11.

The New York firefighters realized after the terror attacks that their colleagues probably would be reluctant to come forward for counseling because most are so self-reliant, but the counselors were determined to remain available for the long haul.

When Katrina hit, the New York firefighters recommended that firefighters in south Louisiana establish a similar program of peer counseling, and that outreach became part of Louisiana Spirit, a mental health initiative supervised by Catholic Charities in New Orleans.

Rigamer held three retreats for first responders in 2007. Those retreats were so successful that he figured a similar program would be appropriate for the agency's counselors on the front lines of the oil spill.

"I was kind of skeptical because this was a silent retreat," said Nathan Conzonere, a firefighter who in his spare time works as a crisis counselor for Catholic Charities at the five church sites. "I was thinking to myself, 'Man, how are we going to be quiet for the whole day? That's almost impossible.'

"But when I got here, I was in awe. I couldn't believe my eyes," he told the Clarion Herald, the archdiocesan newspaper. "It was kind of like a dream I had, seeing all these oak trees. I felt like energy was coming out of me. I was taking in all the fresh air. I could close my eyes and be at peace and let go of all the worries and stress from the oil spill victims."

"Silence enables God's voice to be heard," said Gary Carbo.

Joan Stampley, a crisis counselor who works at Mary Queen of Vietnam in New Orleans East, said the experience was "awesome" because "it gave us a chance to relax and regroup."

Some of the case managers expressed fears that because of the uncertain nature of the Catholic Charities grant under which they are being paid, they might lose their

jobs before Christmas.

“They’re on pins and needles,” Larry Carbo said.

The fishing families they counsel continue to live under enormous stress. Although the oil leak, which began in April, finally was plugged in mid-July and some waters have reopened to fishing and shrimping, dock prices for jumbo shrimp are ridiculously low, he said, ranging from about 75 cents to \$1 a pound instead of the normal \$3.50 to \$4 a pound.

“The shrimpers are taking a beating,” Larry Carbo added. “And you can forget about the oysters. That’ll be another five years before that recovers. BP has to launch a major media campaign to tell people around the United States that our seafood is good.”

Because so many fishermen are not out on the water, they have lost the major activity that offers fulfillment and gives their lives purpose, said crisis counselor Lyn Shraberg.

“When they’re out on the water, they feel whole and alive,” Shraberg said. “There’s a feeling of wellness. Now they are very stressed, very weary and very sad.”

Rigamer said he hopes to offer additional retreats for “client leaders” – the fishermen who have taken leadership roles in the small fishing towns that have been most affected by the storm.

Catholic Charities of New Orleans has a \$6.7 million grant from BP to provide behavioral health counseling, but BP has not responded to a separate grant request that would allow the agency to provide ongoing material assistance, such as food vouchers.