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Pier 94 helps kin with legal, personal grief

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Ground Zero may be in lower Manhattan, but the epicenter of its grief, heartache and anguish is Pier 94, where families of World Trade Center victims come to apply for death certificates.

Called the "grief center" by somber but dedicated aid workers, the pier at 54th St. and 12th Ave. is staffed with clergy, psychologists, attorneys and social workers. All are on hand to help the thousands of bereaved relatives and friends expected to come in to fill out forms documenting the deaths of loved ones.

"It's not a complicated form, but it is very difficult because you're asked things like, 'When did you last see the person?'" said Cathleen McLaughlin, one of hundreds of attorneys who volunteered to help people with the paperwork. "It's very emotional, and virtually everyone I worked with lost it at some point."

After filling out the forms, family members can take a boat ride down to the site of the attack. Some said the trip offered closure. Others said they weren't up to it.

Annov Vdovitso, a native of Siberia who lives in Brooklyn and lost her husband in the attack, said touring the wreckage helped her begin to heal.

"It gave me more hope, like it was a test of my faith," she said. "People need to see it, and they need to pray."

Naomi Boak, a volunteer aid worker who accompanied families to the site, said a collective gasp went up as the families approached what was once the World Trade Center.

"No one talked much. It was a very personal moment," she said. "The [rescue] workers were wonderful, stopping their work to come and meet the families. There was a lot of hugging and crying."

Anthony Gardner, whose brother, Harvey, was on the 83rd floor of 1 World Trade Center, the first building struck by a hijacked plane, decided not to visit the site. "You want to go down and see it, but I didn't think I was ready to handle it," he said.

Instead, Gardner has coped by setting up a Web site, www.wtcunitedfamilygroup.org, where families and friends of the more than 6,000 people killed in the attack can share their stories.

Mayor Giuliani said yesterday afternoon that 565 affidavits for death certificates had been filled out since Wednesday.

The forms name the missing person and state the individual was believed to be at the Trade Center when the attack occurred. City attorneys will file the papers in state courts, asking judges to order the city medical examiner's office to issue death certificates. The certificates are necessary to collect life insurance and probate wills.

"From what I can tell, the process is very sensitive and very well-handled," said Giuliani, who praised the volunteers assisting families.

Among the workers at Pier 94 were about 20 dogs certified to comfort grieving relatives and even stressed-out aid workers. Cate Pontoni brought Molly, her basset hound, to the center yesterday, and the dog immediately connected, she said.

"One lady said, 'You don't know what it's like to be able to do something normal, like pet a dog,'" Pontoni said.

Several Metropolitan Transportation Authority buses have been chartered to shuttle family members to and from the center. On the side of one yesterday was an ad for "Crossing Over," the television show on which host John Edward purports to communicate with the dead.

"What if you could hear from a lost loved one just one more time?" reads the ad.



MICHAEL APPLETON

THERAPY Naomi Boak hugs dog Lady George, brought to Pier 94 to bring comfort to aid workers and grieving relatives.

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