NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document



sensed the quiet distress of some colleagues, had seen the hollow look in their faces. "I don't think they have a clue," he said. "They're overwhelmed. And guys are going to tough it out. That's the attitude of firefighters."

The Fire Department has also established advisory panels, stocked with nationally recognized experts in post-traumatic stress, to help it anticipate and address the emotional issues that are almost certain to appear in the months and years to come. A problem, of course, is that nothing quite compares to what happened to the department.

In the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, for example, the victims were generally not known to the rescuers, and no rescuers were lost. In New York, the fathers, brothers, sons and colleagues of firefighters were lost. "I think that's why it's hard to predict what the outcome will be," said Dr. Kerry J. Kelly, the department's chief medical officer. "I can't stress how much they're like a family."

The best way to understand life in a firehouse is to imagine a family of many brothers who have other homes and families, but who come together — sometimes for 24 hours at a time — to live and work side by side. Beyond the tasks of cleaning equipment and answering fire calls, they also share "committee work": cooking, laundry, dishwashing. It is a place where teasing is as common as breathing, a place where lifelong friendships often develop. But even without friendship, a bond remains.

## Dealing with loss in a second family of many brothers.

"You may not even like each other in a social setting," explained Capt. Frank Leto, an 18-year veteran now assigned to the counseling unit. "But you trust each other with your life."

Then there is the kid brother, or probationary firefighter. He is expected to be the last to sit down for dinner, the first to clean the pots. He wears an orange decal, or "pumpkin patch," on his helmet to signal his inexperience, so that veteran firefighters know that they are responsible for his safety.

Completing the dynamic is the deeply felt responsibility to the firefighters' families. "As a commanding officer, I always think that I have responsibility not only for those guys, but for their wives and kids," Captain Leto said. "And they're all in that truck."

This tradition-bound culture was rocked to its core by the World Trade Center disaster. It was not just that firefighters lost their brothers; it was that they did not save their colleagues, did not die instead of their brothers — including the six probationary firefighters who were killed. What's more, in most cases they have been denied the honor of recovering their brothers' bodies.

Malachy Corrigan, who heads the counseling unit, was one of several mental health experts to marvel at the dedication of the firefighters, as evidenced by their response to last month's jetliner crash in the Rockaways. Even so, he said, "There are just so many cultural imperatives that have been violated here."

For weeks after the disaster, firefighters could not close their firehouse doors, so great was the public's outpouring of sympathy and good will. Firefighters say that they drew strength from the hugs and casseroles, but some acknowledge that the attention disrupted the comforting sameness of their routine. Celebrity chefs bounded in, promising to whip up a real meal, unaware of the pride that firefighters take in their own culinary skills. In a few cases, doctors wrote out prescriptions for medication on the spot — a violation of standard medical practice that had Mr. Corrigan shaking his head.

All the while, the memorial-card photographs of dead firefighters were being tacked onto firehouse walls, as services and funerals climbed into the dozens and then into the hundreds. And there remained the pervasive sense, as Captain Leto put it, that "it is still very much September 12th."

The firefighters' inevitable anger — directed first at Osama bin Laden, then at Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen and Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani — was sometimes very public. A few scuffled with police officers at the disaster site after City Hall briefly reduced the number of firefighters assigned to recovering bodies at the scene. Some engaged in drunken carousing at the Concert for New York City in Madison Square Garden in October. One firefighter even boldly flashed an obscene gesture behind the fire commissioner's back — an act that fire officials say would not have been attempted, or tolerated, before Sept. 11.

Mr. Corrigan explained the pervasive anger this way: "The pain is so great; somebody must be responsible for this."

There is also intense survivor's guilt, to which Captain Leto can attest. He knows the exact date of his promotion to lieutenant seven years ago, but cannot remember the day he was promoted to captain, less than three months ago. "It was an extremely difficult day for me," he said. "When I got promoted to lieutenant, it meant that someone who had served 30 years was now on the golf course, or playing with grandkids. But when I got promoted to captain, it was because some captain died in the line of duty, leaving a family."

There is even the pain of the empty chairs at the firehouses, the ones where those now dead had always sat. "At some point, a new firefighter has to sit in that chair, but what does that evoke?" asked Dr. Terence M. Keane, a professor of psychiatry at Boston University and one of the experts in post-traumatic stress who is advising the Fire Department. "The memory of that person, and articulating that memory can create anger, frustration, rejection of the individual. And what is the cost of that to the cohesiveness of the firehouse unit?"

These are some of the questions that the department's counseling unit hopes to address in the coming months and years, with the help of a database to catalog the types of calls that it receives. Those calls are already coming in: before Sept. 11, the unit handled about 50 new cases a month; since the disaster, it has opened more than 1,500 cases.

Suddenly, an 11-member unit that was more accustomed to handling isolated cases of alcoholism and grief was inundated with calls for its services. Since then, the department has secured $3 million in federal money for outreach programs; put together a network of retired firefighters and volunteers, all with counseling experience; opened suburban satellite offices; and reminded firefighters that their duties included recognizing when distressed colleagues may need counseling.

They have also scheduled a series of discussions on pressing issues. A current topic: How to deal with the holidays.

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