

A Caring Presence

TIP provides compassionate service in crisis situations

By Beth Phaner

As residents of wildfire- and earthquake-prone Southern California, we're often reminded of the preparations we need to take in the event of a natural disaster. But what about unexpected tragedies such as the death of a loved one in a car crash, a suicide, a drowning, or other tragic circumstance?

Many people aren't prepared to deal with the emotional fallout from such traumatic events, and the people who work in emergency-response agencies—such as police officers, firefighters, and paramedics—are often too busy with their own responsibilities during a crisis to offer emotional support to victims or survivors in those difficult hours. That's what prompted Wayne Fortin to start Trauma Intervention Programs Inc., a national nonprofit organization devoted to providing immediate on-scene compassionate support to victims and their families in the wake of a medical emergency, crime, or other calamity.

Fortin, a former mental health counselor at the North Coastal Mental Health Center in Oceanside, founded TIP in 1985 in San Diego after hearing clients express their feelings of being alone, ignored, or mistreated in the aftermath of a tragic event. TIP was also a response to the concerns of public safety personnel, who experience

stress when they have to leave distraught people behind in a crisis situation.

Today, TIP has 20 regional chapters and serves more than 250 cities, 300 police and fire agencies, and 200 hospitals nationwide, including seven TIP chapters in California (see sidebar). TIP's slogan, "Citizens Helping Citizens in Crisis," sums up the philosophy of the program, which trains volunteers to offer emotional first aid in emergency situations 24 hours a day, 365

days a year. TIP volunteers undergo an extensive background check and 55 hours of training before they begin taking on three 12-hour shifts a month. "Their principal quality is courage," Fortin says of TIP volunteers. "Few people can actually do what they do—go into tragic situations and comfort people during the worst times of their lives."

TIP volunteers assist and comfort people in a variety of situations: the parents of a young child who drowns in a pool, an elderly woman who awakens to find that her spouse of 50 years has died, or a victim of a violent crime. "What we hear over and over from the letters we get is, simply, thank you for being there," says Fortin. "It may sound a bit nebulous, but you have to remember that when we're there, it's typically the most difficult time for the person. So the most important thing we can bring is a caring presence." **W**



TIP Chapters in California

Corona: (951) 736-2373

Foothill/Mountain Chapter: (559) 855-3206

Fresno: (559) 265-8730

Orange County: (949) 707-9016; tiporangecounty.org

San Diego County: (760) 931-2104; tipsandiego.org

Southwest Riverside County: (951) 698-2453

Yuba-Sutter Counties: (530) 673-9300

For more information on the TIP program or to find out how to become a volunteer, go to tipnational.org.