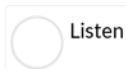


Conference explores ties between disasters, mental health

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New Paltz, NY – The ten-year anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks is less than five months away, but at a recent conference in the Hudson Valley, the focus was on the past, present, and future impacts of the tragedy. WAMC's Greg Fry has more on a conference that had little to do with national security, and everything to do with the mental health side of disasters...

Speakers at the two-day conference on the State University of New York at New Paltz campus covered topics such as the response to 9/11, the support offered to first responders, the lessons learned from responses to disasters, and how the significant anniversary of a major disaster can be handled.

Dr. James Halpern is the Director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz. He says one goal of the conference was to make attendees better equipped to handle whatever the next disaster may be.

Michael Hogan is the Commissioner of the New York State Office of Mental Health. He says it wasn't until World War II that the concept of community mental health was brought into focus. Now, he says, while many lessons have been learned, there's still a tremendous amount of progress to be made.

Conference attendees also heard from retired Army Colonel Dr. Elspeth Cameron Ritchie, who spoke about the response to the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon. She spoke of the establishment of a family assistance center following the attack, and some of the uncertainty surrounding the establishment of that type of center for those directly impacted.

While the response to disasters may be improving, questions still surround how those deeply impacted may react to a significant anniversary.

Steve Moskowitz is the Director of Emergency Preparedness and Response for the New York State Office of Mental Health. He spoke of the need to prepare for the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the nation's worst terror attack.

Moskowitz adds that funding is always a challenge for preparations in the mental health field. He says, at times, major events and disasters are the best way to get people to pay attention and acknowledge that funding is necessary for mental health preparedness. Halpern says it's clear that support can help people recover from this type of trauma.

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