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Disaster Mental Health Conference Focuses On Mass Transportation

By ALLISON DUNNE • APR 14, 2016

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The Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz is holding its annual conference Friday. This year's focus is on responding to mass transportation disasters.

The conference at the State University of New York at New Paltz will address the complex emergency response and mental health challenges generated by mass transportation disasters, including aviation, train and bus crashes. Dr. James Halpern is director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health. He explains why the transportation topic was chosen.

"When we began talking with Homeland Security and Emergency Services about this year's conference there had just been a couple of plane crashes that occurred. We had just experienced the Amtrak train derailment and disaster in Philadelphia," says Halpern. "And because New York state is a transportation hub — in the state, we have 20 major national, international airports, commuter railroads, 13 national rail lines and thousands of bus routes — it just made sense for us to do something on this kind of disaster."

He says this type of disaster warrants a complex response, with many agencies and personnel likely to respond. Halpern says it's important to bring these groups together for the conference.

"The mental health needs are addressed by National Transportation Safety Board, by Victim Services, by Red Cross, by state and county mental health," Halpern says. "And it's so important that those organizations work effectively together. Those issues of coordination and cooperation are central in effective response."

He says mass transportation disasters differ from many others in the following ways.

"Certainly the type of trauma itself is a little bit different from others," says Halpern. "Here you are in a situation where it certainly comes without warning. Injuries and deaths can occur violently. They are likely to be occurring off course and untimely; that is to say that children are as likely to die as adults or others, and even multiple members of the same family can be casualties."

While the case studies in the conference do not focus on any Hudson Valley transportation disasters, the region has had a few the past five years. February marked the one-year anniversary of what has been called the deadliest crash in Metro-North Railroad history, when a commuter train crashed into an SUV that was stopped on the tracks at a crossing in Valhalla, killing five people on the train and the car's driver. There also was the fatal 2013 Metro-North derailment at Spuyten Duyvil in the Bronx, in which three Hudson Valley residents were killed. One of the conference's speakers is Dr. Laurie Ann Pearlman, author of *Treating Traumatic Bereavement: A Practitioner's Guide*.

"I'm going to be talking about traumatic bereavement, in particular, in adults," says Pearlman. "And, by this, I mean the experience of persistent trauma and grief following the sudden death of a significant other or a loved one, usually in a sudden or violent or untimely way."

She will talk about this at the morning keynote address and in the afternoon do a workshop for clinicians on treating traumatic bereavement.

“It’s not only trauma and it’s not only bereavement. It’s the combination of the two,” says Pearlman. “And it’s easy for survivors to focus on one or the other. And it’s easy for providers to focus on one or the other. But folks who’ve been through these kinds of experiences really need help with both.”

Plus, says Halpern:


“I’m very pleased that in the afternoon we have a panel discussion with Samantha Philips, who is the head of Philadelphia Emergency Management and led the Amtrak response, actually which she did in the middle of planning for the Pope’s visit,” Halpern says. “And we have a leader from the American Red Cross, and a leader from Disaster Interfaith Network.”

The conference is sponsored by New York’s Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services. Seats filled up quickly.

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