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SUNY students learn disaster relief

By Steve Earley , Freeman staff

NEW PALTZ - As relief agencies across the country are scrambling to train people to respond to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, SUNY New Paltz is starting a program that will bolster the ranks of ready-to-go volunteers.



James Halpern teaches a class in the Disaster Studies program at SUNY New Paltz.

This fall, New Paltz is offering a new minor in Disaster Studies through the college's Institute for Disaster Mental Health. The program, planned before the hurricane struck, will verse students in what organizers call "psychological first aid" and touch on more tangential subjects, such as controlling rumors and the political implications of disasters.

Those who complete the program will be required to volunteer with American Red Cross their first year out of school.

"Hopefully, they'll continue to provide their services well after they graduate," said institute Director James Halpern. "Or maybe they'll find a way to turn this into a career. Homeland security is certainly a growing job opportunity."

THE IMMEDIATE physical needs after a disaster - food, clothing, shelter - are clear (though, as the situation in New Orleans demonstrated, sometimes difficult to provide). But less obvious is how to give emotional relief to victims is less obvious.

Halpern, a psychology professor at New Paltz who has responded to local and national disasters as a member of the Red Cross' Disaster Mental Health Services, said the psychological effects of traumatic events can linger long after one's home is rebuilt.

"There is no such thing as closure," he said. "It's nonsense. People can learn to live with loss, but learning to live with it is not the same as learning to get over it."

LIKE emergency medicine, emergency mental health services are constantly evolving, said institute board member Bill McCarthy, director of disaster services for the Red Cross of Ulster County.

"The old thinking was to rush right in," he said. "Now it's to stand back and look at what the situation is."

Immediately after a disaster, McCarthy said, people are so shell-shocked or preoccupied with finding food or shelter that forcing the issue of psychological help won't do much good.

"Stand back and tell them (help) is available. You can call us whenever you want, but you don't have to," he said.

THE FUNDAMENTALS of disaster mental health, Halpern said, are to be calm, kind and, above all, available.

"Sometimes people don't go to a memorial service because they don't know what to say, when just their presence is a show of support," he said.

CLASSES required for the Disaster Studies minor at New Paltz include Introduction to Disasters, Overview of Disaster Mental Health, Mass Care and Shelter Operations.

In the program's second semester, students will complete fieldwork and additional Red Cross training. Halpern said the institute has made arrangements with the Ulster County chapter of the Red Cross and the Red Cross of Greater New York for students to provide help in the event of a disaster. If no disasters occur during the semester, students will complete planning exercises and help educate the public about disaster preparation and prevention.

IN ADDITION to developing skilled volunteers, the 1-year-old institute, whose board of directors includes professors and government and non-profit officials from Dutchess, Orange and Ulster counties, is a valuable network for local mental health professionals as they seek out how best to respond to a disaster, organizers said.

Last May, the institute hosted a conference on lessons learned from the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and plans for next year include a symposium examining the most effective long-term mental health strategies for victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Halpern said disasters are more common than most people realize. He said the Red Cross responds to 65,000 disasters nationwide each year, including house fires that may go unnoticed by a large number of people but are no less devastating for those involved.

THE INSTITUTE jibes well with the larger mission of the college, said board members Gerald Benjamin, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at New Paltz.

"There was clearly a need in Southern New York," Benjamin said. "And among the purposes of a public university is to provide services in support of local governments and support the well-being in the state."

McCARTHY said he hopes the institute will be a model for other communities.

"We're really hoping that this goes statewide (within the SUNY system)... and eventually into the private schools," he said.