

There's someone for everyone in difficult situations

Orange County's Trauma Intervention Program
volunteers offer emotional
first-aid during emergencies

by Deborah S. Paul

How do you comfort children who have seen a sibling killed by a passing car? Or a family who watches fire consume their home?

The Trauma Intervention Program of Orange County chapter (www.tiporangecounty.org) was founded in 1995 to help people experiencing just such events. TIP volunteers are trained to work predominately with victims, but they also learn to assist firefighters, police, hospitals, and other public safety organizations in giving first-response emotional aid.

Volunteers distribute cuddly stuffed animals to children, teen, and adult survivors, and offer hard-to-discuss information on such matters as crime scene cleanup, coroners, and death certificates. They also provide healing and grief resources.

Today, 80 TIP of Orange County volunteers respond to about 80 calls per month and serve 18 jurisdictions, 12 hospitals, and eight public safety organizations 365 days a year, says Sandy Hill, the group's community relations manager.

While being a TIP volunteer can be extremely rewarding, it isn't for the squeamish, says Michael Wada, who joined TIP five years ago after losing his father and didn't know where to turn. He completed the required 56 training hours and has been working highly charged crime and accident scenes in Orange County ever since.

"What I do is not for everyone," says Wada, who once helped comfort the family of a high-profile murder case. "Trainers keep an eye on how people react to situations. Sometimes we respond to paramedics, firefighters, or police who need someone to talk to, too."

Sometimes the people and emergencies are so sad, TIP's own crisis team managers call for volunteer debriefings, Wada says.

Holiday and year-round donations supplement training classes for volunteers, healing resources for clients, and purchasing comfort toys such as teddy bears and stuffed lions, which are used to inspire strength and courage. TIP's motto encourages team members to keep plush toys with them at all times—to be "always ready, always there."