

August 20, 2016

THE CHIRON WAY



11 Days, 5 Non-Profits, Lots of Love...

The text came in at 7:03am on Friday, July 29, 2016 from Debbie, one of a dozen participants from the first responder community working in the Southern Oregon area who came together just 10 weeks prior for the initial four day International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) courses.

"Please call as soon as you can. A plane is missing. It doesn't look good."

Initially, I didn't understand. We were already working a plane crash on the Oregon coast involving a volunteer search and rescue pilot who had vanished over the ocean shortly after takeoff while on a recreational flight carrying two 17-year-old passengers, his son and his son's best friend. It had been over three weeks since the small plane disappeared, and our local dive team – his dive team – had been searching for the wreckage non-stop since the tragedy. When I got Debbie's message, I thought they had finally been located – a welcomed, but sickening "relief" for the family and loved ones. However, as we spoke on the phone, I slowly began to understand.

One of *their* planes was missing – a fixed wing medical transport with four souls on board. They had lost all contact after a distress broadcast indicating that there was smoke in the cabin and the pilot was attempting to make an emergency landing. That was over five hours ago and there was still no contact of any kind. Debbie was calling on behalf of her agency. No matter what the outcome, it would be a critical incident beyond anything experienced in the entire 20+ year history of the organization. "Please come, we are going to need help."

Thoughts raced through my mind: We had only just met Debbie at our recent training a little over 2 months ago. We knew nothing about her organization. We have worked numerous multi-line-of-duty deaths, but never involving aviation medical transport. I clearly remembered her sharing that she was the one and only representative from a 4 county area released to attend our training in hopes that one day, the coast would be able to develop a Peer Support and CISM Team – that meant no local trained Peers, Chaplains, or Mental Health Professionals.

Of course we would come. And we would bring trusted support.

The magic of the ICISF model is that once folks are trained, we can all speak a common "language." This communication is further enhanced when embedded within the structure of the Incident Command System (ICS). It took me two hours to drive to the coast; invaluable time to begin the strategic planning that would further take shape after I was able to make initial assessments. Typically, this process would be handled by Peers – trained boots on the ground who could provide an initial scene size up and thoughtfully begin the process of assessing needs as the ICS Machine (as I like to call it) begins to take form. This request for service required a different approach, as the Peer Support resources were not locally available. However, several of Debbie's recent classmates – although freshly trained, and untested as CISM Peers – would make the perfect resources; and Debbie already knew, and trusted them.

A firefighter who served over 10 years as a flight medic, a seasoned trauma nurse with countless hours serving the most critical patients, a veteran who lost 12 of his comrades during his multiple recent deployments, and a first responder spouse whose relationship has been tested by numerous critical incidents – these amazing folks happened to be some of Debbie's classmates. Fully supported by their home agencies, all of them selflessly stepped up to provide support in whatever manner possible to assist their new friend, her colleagues, and their families.

As complete outsiders, we did not have the opportunity to do the hard work of earning trust; we did not understand their culture; our lack of history in the area blinded us to essential strengths and limitations; we were oblivious to local resources; we were significantly hindered by our ignorance. Yet the fundamentals encompassed within the ICISF Model and the structure of Incident Command System seamlessly allowed us to make meaningful contact with absolute strangers under the most difficult circumstances.

A passionately respected pilot, a deeply trusted flight nurse, a larger-than-life beloved flight medic, and the patient in their care all tragically lost their lives. For the next 11 days, 5 non-profits came together to provide structure, support, compassionate presence, and a whole lot of love to a very tight group of profoundly impacted public safety servants, their families, and their communities.

Our service area was spread out over 125 miles along the Pacific Ocean coast – beautiful, rugged, and very poor cell reception. Debbie gave us constant insider guidance and feedback so we could best maximize our efforts. We organized our contacts into hard targets (specific time, location, and groups of people) and soft targets (partner agencies along the way as we travelled up and down the coast). Consistently, our main two interventions were Crisis Management Briefings and Peer Support as we met with hundreds of people representing all facets of the Cal-Ore Life Flight community and their families: ground crews, mechanics, pilots, flight nurses, flight medics, EMS ground transport, hospital ER personnel, fire departments, law enforcement, and communications/dispatch, administration, managers, corporate representatives, and owners. We met with the pilot's widow and family; the family and loved ones of the flight nurse and the flight medic; and the friends and community members who were all tightly woven together through churches, clubs, pubs, sports teams, overlapping employment, and volunteer commitments.

Our non-profit, [Chiron Center, Inc.](#), coordinated all services and strategic planning as well as provided mental health support. The newest members of the [Southern Oregon Critical Incident Response Team](#) were supplemented by Chaplains from the [Rogue Valley Chaplains Association](#) and family support resources from Southern Oregon's [Family First Support Team](#). Our K9 Crisis Response Team friends from [HOPE Animal Assisted Crisis Response](#) provided compassionate presence during our family support meetings, as well as joined the Peers for site visits to public safety agencies. We were all requested to attend the candlelight vigil as well as the public memorial as the close knit community honored and celebrated the lives of their amazingly accomplished and deeply loved, respected, and mourned public safety brother and sisters.

In over 20 years of doing this kind of work, this particular opportunity to be of service provided exceptional clarity, informed by brutal, hard-earned lessons learned from past experiences:

- 1) Trust and maximize the brilliance of the Incident Command System.
- 2) The ICISF Model provides all the tools necessary to truly support folks in their greatest time of need.
- 3) Seasoned, experienced, and proven Team leadership is essential for overall success.
- 4) Your greatest strength and asset is empowering, supporting, and trusting your Peers.
- 5) Your Peers' greatest strength and asset is utilizing the comprehensive depth and support of Chaplains and Mental Health Professionals as fully integrated and valued members of the Team.
- 6) Incorporating multiple trusted resources provides exponentially greater support to those you are serving, while further developing and strengthening resources for future deployments.

The feedback we received regarding our 11 days of service has been exceptional. Corporate experts were deployed from across the country to provide guidance. Upon arrival, they were so impressed with our effectiveness that they not only requested our continued participation for the duration, but sincerely requested guidance regarding critical incident response best practice tactics, protocols, and operations. Debbie shared that she heard nothing but positive reports regarding our support efforts, from the entire range of those we served. Not too shabby for a hastily thrown together, untested, unproven group of outsiders – an absolute testament to the power of CISM and Peer Support embedded within the Incident Command System provided by passionate, well trained, and well-resourced Team members.

It is always so complex and bittersweet to be called upon to provide support after a critical incident; especially after a multiple line-of-duty death tragedy. Fortunately, in this instance every one of us representing our 5 non-profits are humbly proud to share that we were truly able to make a positive difference, and share a lot of love, during our 11 days of CISM and Peer Support response.

Chiron Center, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization. Our mission is to provide behavioral health education, support, and resources designed to maximize the professional excellence and overall quality of life of those who place themselves in harm's way in service of others. For more information, please visit our websites: www.ChironCenter.org, www.ChironCRT.org, & www.ChironStillStanding.org



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