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Haven From the Horrors

A retreat in rural Inverness helps public safety workers deal with the Post-traumatic stress that sometimes come with the job.

By Donna Horowitz - Special to The Times

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Police Officer Wes Fowler had a premonition of tragedy when he took a report of a missing mother and child in Novato, Calif.

Sadly, he was right. The young mother who vanished that morning last year had suffocated her 3-year-old daughter in a Mill Valley hotel.

"That was my defining moment and I broke down crying," he recalled. "I started having flashbacks of all the dead babies over the 23 years, and I couldn't deal with it anymore" after more than two decades of police work.

Fowler found help at the West Coast Post-trauma RetreatSM, a one-week residential program in rural Inverness where public safety workers are given therapy to cope with the Post-traumatic stress of their jobs.

"The therapy sessions were extremely emotional," said Fowler, 48, who is on leave without pay. "It's like they rip you open and scrub you out with a steel-wool brush."

Modeled after a similar program on the East Coast, the Post-trauma Retreat has counseled about 50 public safety workers from throughout the country and as far away as England since opening in May 2001.

The retreat is held quarterly, with no more than seven participants in each session. The days begin at 8:30 a.m. and can last until 10 or 11 p.m. Participants include police officers who have been involved in shootings or witnessed the deaths of partners, firefighters who have survived collapsing buildings and even a diver whose job it was to retrieve bodies.

They arrive suffering nightmares, insomnia, panic attacks and suicidal thoughts. "The goal is to reduce the symptoms and improve their quality of life," said Joel Fay, mental health liaison officer for the San Rafael Police Department and board president of the group.

During the program, emergency workers take psychological tests, meet with mental health professionals, discuss the traumatic events that triggered their breakdowns and learn why they reacted as they did.

They spend hours in group and individual meetings with psychologists. They discuss the incidents that drove them into crisis. They examine personal relationships. They talk about how medication can help, as well as about substance abuse. In the end, the goal is to come away with a plan for the future

so they can avoid relapsing, Fay said.

So far, the group has set aside \$10,000 for a building fund, but with the high cost of property in

Marin and Sonoma counties, the retreat's goal of having a facility of its own is far off, Fay said. The nonprofit group is generally breaking even, charging participants \$2,250 to attend a session. The psychologists, psychiatrist, chaplains and peer counselors are all volunteers who receive only expenses.

Fay, a psychologist, said the most popular part of the program is the support offered by peer counselors — police officers working with police officers and firefighters working with firefighters.

"It's about understanding what the officers or responders have gone through and explaining it to them in a way that makes sense in the culture," Fay said.

Christopher Rivera, a sheriff's deputy in Lake County for 18 years, credits the retreat with saving his life. "I was at the point of blowing my brains out," he said.

Rivera, 47, of Kelseyville said the case that sent him off the deep end was the slayings of a retired couple who were stabbed to death by their son, an ex-Beverly Hills police officer who was convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

After learning about the retreat on the Internet, Rivera attended one session and kept in touch with the organization through follow-up care.

Kathy Hoffman, an investigator for the Marin County district attorney's office for 10 years and a Novato police officer for nine years before that, said she had been reluctant to go to the retreat. "I was incredibly embarrassed," she said.

And though she had been told she was not the only one suffering Post-traumatic stress after years in law enforcement, it didn't sink in until she heard others in her group speak out.

Speaking about her feelings in that setting was such a powerful experience that she suffered a panic attack, ran from the meeting room and became sick to her stomach, she recalled.

"I not only flushed my mind and body, it was incredibly healing," Hoffman said.

The incident that caused her distress was the suicide of a suspected child molester who jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. What got to her as she reviewed the videotape of his last moments was the anguish on his face as he hesitated before hurling himself off.

Now Hoffman wants to join the group of 30 volunteer peer counselors who work with the program.

"If those people hadn't been there for me, I honestly don't know what would have happened. I don't think I would be here to talk about it," she said.