

Chaplains provide comfort to emergency personnel, victims

By Monty Taylor
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Winchester - When an emergency occurs in Frederick County, dispatchers make sure the relevant responders are notified so they can speed to the scene.

Once the fire engines and rescue vehicles are on the way, the dispatchers have a new resource they can call on for particularly traumatic situations: Chaplains.

In a program that began in May, the Frederick County Fire and Rescue Department's chaplains race to some incidents alongside the emergency personnel to provide support to victims, firefighters, and rescue workers.

Senior Chaplain Mark Ransom said the spiritual advisers can help at the scene of an accident by "being good listeners".

But listening is not where it stops.

"We help with spiritual and emotional needs, we haul hoses, we serve coffee ... we're trying to help any way we can," he said.

While Frederick County hasn't had a formal chaplain program until now, fire and rescue chaplains are common throughout Virginia and the nation - enough so that a yearly award is presented to the "Northern Virginia Fire Chaplain of the Year." A Loudoun County fire chaplain received this year's honor.

Ransom is not new to the work. He's also the chaplain for the Winchester Police Department, the Frederick County Sheriff's Office, and the Northwestern Regional Adult Detention Center - all in his off hours as a pilot for United Airlines.

He and the other chaplains are unpaid volunteers.

Frederick County officials have two fire chaplains working with Ransom, and they are called out to difficult incident scenes in which people have died or are seriously injured, or have seen their homes destroyed by fire.

For example, an Oct. 30 fire on Timberlake Terrace near Stephens City damaged 12 condominium units. Ransom and fellow department chaplains Kent Woodward and Daryl Taylor were on the scene.



Mark Ransom is the senior chaplain for the Frederick County Fire and Rescue Department. Ransom said he and his two fellow volunteer chaplains "help with spiritual and emotional needs" at difficult incident scenes in which people have died or are seriously injured, or have seen their homes destroyed by fire.

(Photo by Jeff Taylor)

They answered questions from the victims as their homes burned, handed out coffee and doughnuts, and went to the hospital with the injured.

"We don't care [what we are asked to do]; we do whatever we can," Ransom said.

When chaplains arrive at an incident scene, they're there to help the victims - as much as possible.

"I wasn't trained to make pain and grief disappear," Ransom said. "All I can do is listen, let them tell me about it."

Although he is an ordained Baptist minister, he is careful to keep his chaplain services nondenominational. "Chaplain is a little different than pastor ... we're not out there trying to have church," Ransom said.

One difference is that pastors, ministers, and rabbis generally provide comfort after someone has learned that a loved one has died. At the scene of a fire or a car accident, Ransom and his fellow chaplains are trying to help people who may not know the fate of their loved ones, or are watching the worst happen right in front of them.

"Sometimes people are mad at God when that happens. They don't want to hear about it," Ransom said.

The county department's chaplains go through training to handle the sometimes overwhelming emotional nature of catastrophic accidents.

They also are taught some basics about firefighting so they can answer victims' questions, stay out of the way, or even lend a hand.

According to county Fire and Rescue Chief Tim Welsh, the department created its chaplain program as much for the firefighters as for the victims. "You're exposed to some pretty heavy things."

He said firefighters and rescue personnel are emotionally affected by grisly accident scenes, dead bodies, and the sight of someone's home burn down.

"People do this for a lot of reasons, but they tend to be people with a lot of compassion," Welsh said of firefighters. "Knowing that people are going to be without a home can be traumatic."

That's where the chaplain program comes in.

"Firefighters as a rule don't want to talk about this kind of thing," Ransom said, "but they can talk to us."

Volunteer for Frederick County Fire & Rescue Today!

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