

Sandy Hook Shootings Shake Even Most Seasoned Chaplains

This is a deployment no **Billy Graham** chaplain could have ever fathomed.

Call it tragic. Or horrific. Or unspeakable. But the reality of what happened in an innocent elementary school in Newtown, Conn., is something this community will have to forever endure.

By Friday night, 10 crisis-trained chaplains from the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team were on the ground in Newtown. And some of the first people they crossed paths with were the First Responders, who were still dealing with shock at the scene inside Sandy Hook Elementary School.

“Nobody needs to know what I saw,” **chaplain** Toni New replayed what a first responder told her. “Nobody needs to know.”

The challenge in dealing with such unexpected carnage is taking its toll on the public servants of this town and that’s one area the chaplains have tried to focus their ministry on.

“They’ve never encountered anything of this magnitude in terms of being this bizarre and brutal and large-scale,” chaplain Jack Dowling, a retired police officer, said. “This is really a challenge for even seasoned law enforcement officers, firefighters and paramedics.”

Toni, who is also a licensed counselor, has been to other shooting deployments, including Aurora, Colo., this past summer, but she said she’s not experienced anything like Newtown. One of the first people she talked and prayed with was a detective who had been in the school interviewing those connected to the tragedy.

"He seemed to have a need to pour out what he was carrying," Toni recalled. "The information was really disturbing and difficult for me, so now it was hard for him.

"I was able to **pray** with him. I gave him a hug and I could see that brought some comfort."

But the chaplains are very mindful of respecting people's boundaries, especially in a deployment this sensitive.

"Being a chaplain means you have to be willing to listen and you have to ask the right questions and not impose on them personally," Toni said. "Ask what they're thinking about and what they're feeling and [then you will know] what direction to take."

Chaplains have to understand the importance of "not imposing on them and not hugging without asking," she added. "but getting permission to get into their space. And when you get that permission and you see that smile of gratefulness, you know that somehow that touch brought them comfort and something you did or said brought hope to them."

As trained and experienced as they are, these chaplains have never encountered this type of deployment. And being able to experience the touch of God working through them helps them make it through each day.

"It's just such a shock to even our seasoned chaplain coordinators," Jack said. "It's only by the grace of the Lord, who has called us to do this, that we are able to wrap our minds around the brutality and the senselessness and evil in this situation."

The mission of the chaplains this week is to take those evil thoughts captive and remind each person they encounter that there is hope and comfort out there and His name is Jesus.

"People can't believe this happened in this beautiful little

small town,” Toni said. “There’s still a lot of shock. And I think we’re going to see a lot of anger.”

And that extends to the First Responders, who are still focused on serving Newtown in a time when they are hurting themselves.

“Even talking with some of the police officers, they’re feeling like ‘my family could’ve been here,” Toni said. “My family could’ve been the ones in the school.’ ”

[Click here to read the original story at .](#)