

Preparing for the worst

'Disaster conference' to be held at SUNY New Paltz

By Robert Ford

Ulster County Press

Are you prepared for a catastrophe? A pretty big question, isn't it?

To help communities and residents get the knowledge they need to be prepared, the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the State University of New York at New Paltz will hold its annual conference on April 27 with the theme, "Our Community Prepares." During the conference there will be presentations on a number of approaches that will help communities improve their "planning, quality and availability of services for mass trauma survivors and their families in the seven-county Hudson Valley region," according to a press release from SUNY New Paltz.

There will be an evening showing on April 26 of the Spike Lee movie, "When the Levees Broke," a documentary about the flooding of New Orleans and the federal response to the disaster after Hurricane Katrina struck.

The following day, which is the first full day of the conference, presentations throughout the day will address, "What lessons can we learn from that failed response to ensure that our community is prepared for future disasters?"

Highlights of the conference include the keynote address by Dr. Darlene Washington, a disaster preparedness expert from the American Red Cross (ARC) in Washington, D.C. and a panel discussion on preparing for disaster in the Hudson Valley. Washington is also team leader for Influenza Pandemic Planning with the ARC and is responsible for the unit's developing, testing and implementing disaster preparedness education for the general public.

A lunchtime panel discussion will feature members of the New Paltz faculty giving their take on the Spike Lee movie.

The afternoon session will include workshop discussions on pandemic flu; promoting resiliency in children; leadership in emergency management; and counseling first responders.

"This year's conference is designed to be useful to the general public as well as those involved in emergency and disaster response," said James Halpern, director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health and professor of psychology. "In spite of the fact that the last hurricane season was milder than predicted, disasters are common. The American Red Cross responds to 80,000 a year. Most of us alternate between being too reactive to threat and finding comfort in denial and avoidance. There will be epidemics, fires and other natural and human caused disasters. Rather than being overemotional or in denial, we should calmly prepare as individuals, families and communities."

Eric Gullickson, director of Media Relations for SUNY New Paltz, said the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the school is the only one of its kind in the northeast and conferences such as this one help keep town supervisors, emergency response personnel and residents informed on how to plan and deal with a disaster.

"We act as an information hub for the region, because there is nothing else like this," Gullickson said.

A conference such as this will draw educators and governmental officials and emergency responders from across the north east and provide them with the information that they

need to take back to their towns and organizations to help them better prepare for disasters, Gullickson said.

For SUNY New Paltz students, they can also minor in disaster preparedness, which will enable them to either get a job in the field of disaster preparedness or be able to take it back to their communities where they can share what they learned.

For more information about the conference to to www.newpaltz.edu/idmh/conference.html.