NEW PALTZ — If reports are true that operator error caused Sunday’s train wreck, survivors and their families may be able to take comfort — though it may be cold comfort — in having someone to blame.

Karla Vermeulen, acting director of SUNY New Paltz’s Institute for Disaster Mental Health, said on Tuesday that assigning culpability in disasters like this can provide survivors with the chance to eventually get justice or retribution.

“If it’s true that the (engineer) was asleep or ‘zoned out,’ that could be perceived as something beneficial — people would have someone to blame,” she said.

A number of news agencies have reported that engineer William Rockefeller may have briefly fallen asleep or lost focus moments before the train shot off the tracks. Rockefeller, who grew up in Rhinebeck and lives in Germantown in Columbia County, has not spoken to the news media.

In cases of airplane disasters, where operator error has been determined to be the cause, the operator usually died with the passengers, Vermeulen said, denying survivors and their families the chance to see justice done in some way.

There is similar psychological trauma associated with victims of “natural calamities,” such as hurricanes, she said.

“It may be beneficial or helpful if people feel they can get justice or retribution.”
Operator error may also have a calming effect on people who rely on train travel, Vermeulen said, if people feel the problem was the fault of an individual and not a mechanical error that might be repeated.