

## Crisis response gets 'savvier' at SUNY New Paltz

By Jeremiah Horrigan

Posted Feb 9, 2009 at 2:00 AM

NEW PALTZ — James Halpern remembers the worst-case scenario the Red Cross had devised for training professional mental-health volunteers such as himself for disaster relief nearly a decade ago. The scenario imagined the simultaneous crash of two passenger jets in Queens.

NEW PALTZ — James Halpern remembers the worst-case scenario the Red Cross had devised for training professional mental-health volunteers such as himself for disaster relief nearly a decade ago. The scenario imagined the simultaneous crash of two passenger jets in Queens.

After the training was over, the organizers came in for some heat. A pair of plane crashes in the metropolitan region?

“We thought it was beyond what was possible,” Halpern recalled last week.

Halpern’s training session took place in the spring of 2001. A few months later, an even more impossible-seeming catastrophe struck the city, the country and the world.

Since that time, Halpern has established SUNY New Paltz’s Institute for Disaster Mental Health, one of the few such programs in the country that specializes in the training of students, community residents and people in the helping professions to care for others in the wake of disasters.

The Red Cross has been the traditional bulwark on which disaster-relief efforts rested. But what’s new about the institute’s mission is that it supplies more than the traditional physical resources of shelter, food and clothing — it deals with a victim’s immediate and long-range psychological needs.

Since the institute’s inception in 2004, students have responded to local floods and fires and provided assistance to survivors of 9/11 and natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

“We’ve become a lot savvier in recent years about the needs these kinds of disasters present,” Halpern said.

The program is small but influential, composed of Halpern, institute coordinator Karla Vermeulen and graduate assistant Rachael Bisceglie. This April, the institute will hold an international conference featuring the man who coordinated the British response to the London subway bombings in 2005.

An easygoing, genial man, Halpern usually arrives in the wake of catastrophes. But a recent visit to Israel, where he’d been invited to speak at David Ben-Gurion University, gave him a harrowing taste of what it feels like to be on the scene as a disaster unfolds.

The university was believed to be out of range of rocket attacks by Hamas, but before he knew it, sirens had sounded and the city was under attack.

“I found I didn’t feel afraid (during the attack),” he recalled. “But the next day, the sound of ambulances startled me.”

He said the experience reminded him of the way New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman described Sept. 11, as “an attack on our imagination.”

It was the kind of attack that highlighted for Halpern the institute’s value, as well as its need.

[jhorrigan@th-record.com](mailto:jhorrigan@th-record.com)



### **SIGN UP FOR DAILY E-MAIL**

Wake up to the day’s top news, delivered to your inbox

---

### **MOST POPULAR STORIES**