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SciPAC Hatch Photo: (L to R) CDR Dan Shine, LT Arlin Hatch, CDR Chideha Ohuoa and LCDR Kay Beaulieu

My Deployment Experience in American Samoa

By LT Arlin L. Hatch, USPHS

When the September 29, 2009 American Samoa tsunami hit the airwaves, I felt a keen sense of anticipation. Though I have always remained abreast of news and disasters that plague our world, I had never had the opportunity to personally respond in a relief capacity. On October 22nd, my first deployment began. A clinical psychologist by training, I was one of four mental health professionals from MHT-1 to respond to the Mental Health Mission Assignment in American Samoa. After crossing five time zones during 12 hours of flight, I found myself situated in the juxtaposition between tropical paradise and human suffering resulting from the devastation that hit the island.

My understanding of the earthquake and tsunami impact deepened over the first few days of our deployment. The morning after our arrival, we met with the American Samoa Governor, the FEMA Incident Commander, and other agency leaders. This was immediately followed by an extended encounter with leadership from the Department of Health and the Department of Human and Social Services, who recounted story after story of lives lost, entire villages destroyed, and families besieged by grief at having had loved ones pulled from their grasp and washed out to sea. It quickly became clear that

the mental health system that had been strained before the tsunami, had become overwhelmed both by the sheer scope of the disaster as well as by the personal impact sustained by the local mental health workers themselves.

Our team initially focused on clarifying and prioritizing requests for our assistance with the various stakeholders. First on the agenda would be to work alongside representatives from the CDC to gather community impact data within selected villages, while continuing to identify persons experiencing significant traumatic reactions. Second, we triaged the 300+ mental health referrals that had been mostly generated before our arrival. Third, we met with the various governmental agency directors to clarify resources, coordinate efforts, and develop a plan of patient follow-up to extend beyond our stay. Fourth, we began evaluating and treating those individuals of greatest identified needs, such as members of families with deceased, persons who had lost their homes or witnessed death, and anyone else noted to be experiencing severe traumatic reactions. During the course of evaluating and providing acute mental health care, we developed training presentations based on identified need, to empower those professionals who would remain, with additional resources and tools to assist their own people long after our departure. All told, we evaluated and treated 245 of the most critically affected, and trained 170 counselors from seven agencies, in anxiety management and relaxation strategies, approaches to restore healthy sleep and reduce nightmares, and provider resiliency tactics. We met with a smaller group of mental health professionals on the island to train them on a structured, research-supported Posttraumatic Stress Disorder treatment protocol. Lastly, protocols were developed to help people begin to feel safe in the ocean again, and to facilitate schools and parents in the process of returning children to school, since many children were terrified of separating from family after the tsunami.

It was a privilege to work alongside the dedicated and competent professionals who joined me from MHT-1, and to galvanize friendships in the process. I shared this experience with CDR Dan Shine (psychiatrist), CDR Chideha Ohuoha (psychiatrist), and LCDR Kay Beaulieu (psychologist). The emotional toll of long days dealing with extreme devastation over the course of six- to seven-day workweeks was always mitigated by finding opportunities to connect, decompress, and strengthen our resiliency through appropriate levity. All of us benefited greatly from the tireless support of the local agency leadership and staff, by the skilled guidance of CAPT Stephen Formanski (our ESF-8 Liaison), and the attentive at-home support of our MHT-1 leadership. I feel a profound sense of gratitude for this amazing experience, and will always remember the people I met in American Samoa, and the lessons they taught me of courage, generosity, faith, community, and hope.

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