

LifeNet Newsletter article

Submitted by:

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At dinner time on September 9, 2010 a gas pipe exploded in a San Bruno, California neighborhood which killed eight people, injured four firefighters, destroyed 38 homes, and damaged 70, and prompted the evacuation of 376 homes. The fire burned for 13 hours calling for a multiagency coordinated response by 600 firefighters/Emergency Medical Technicians, CALFIRE, and 325 police officers from nine cities within San Mateo County including Brisbane, Burlingame, Colma, Daly City, Milbrae, Pacifica, San Bruno and San Mateo. The explosion ruptured the main water supply so many fire trucks did not have water to extinguish the huge plume of flames. The gas was not turned off for 1 ½ hours after the initial explosion. Media from all local sources carried the stories for over a year; national media sources such as CNN also paid close attention to the event.

The purpose of this newsletter article is threefold. First to describe a multidiscipline peer support response to a large-scale multifatality disaster attended to by public safety personnel in almost every discipline. A debriefer is a first responder who provided peer support using a group debriefing. The second purpose of the article is to provide data that examines the debriefer's opinion of what is helpful in preparing them from initial interest in a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) team to leading or participating in a large scale, multiagency peer support response to an event such as the San Bruno pipeline explosion. Of the 34 debriefers 17 of them returned a survey. Data from these debriefers are illustrated in graph #1. These debriefers will be referred to as "respondents." The third purpose of the article is to present the lessons learned from these debriefings. The data presented here represent a subsection of a larger study by the author. The public safety personnel who attended the debriefings were not surveyed in this study.

### The Respondents

Thirty-four debriefers (or respondents) from three Critical Incident Stress Management teams were involved in providing 75 one on one peer support contacts, facilitating three medium sized group debriefings, and four large group debriefings with a maximum of 25 personnel attending between September 11, and October 13, 2010 (John Warren, personal communication). The author also provided a debriefing but did not complete a survey. These efforts reached 400 individuals within 30 days of the event. A single large group debriefing was held for Chief Officers and command staff of the involved agencies.

	San Mateo County Team	Bay Area	San Mateo OES Sheriffs	Total
Debriefers	16	12	6	34
Survey responses	10	5	2	17
Response rate	62.5%	41.6%	33%	50%

Limited demographics of the respondents were taken to keep the survey brief, and protect the anonymity of the group. The respondents were an experienced group of peer supporters with a minimum of two years experience on a peer support team. Of a total of 17 respondents, 11% had 2-4 years of experience in a peer support team, and 88% had over 5 years. In keeping with the peer support model, the respondents were either public safety personnel on active duty (13) or who had retired from work in public safety (3). One mental health provider completed the survey.

Due to the enormity of this catastrophic event, many of the debriefing teams were also on duty or working at the site of the explosion. Six of the 17 surveys returned (35%) were from respondents who worked on the scene of the explosion. Nine of the seventeen surveys returned (53%) were from respondents who were not working on the scene at any time.

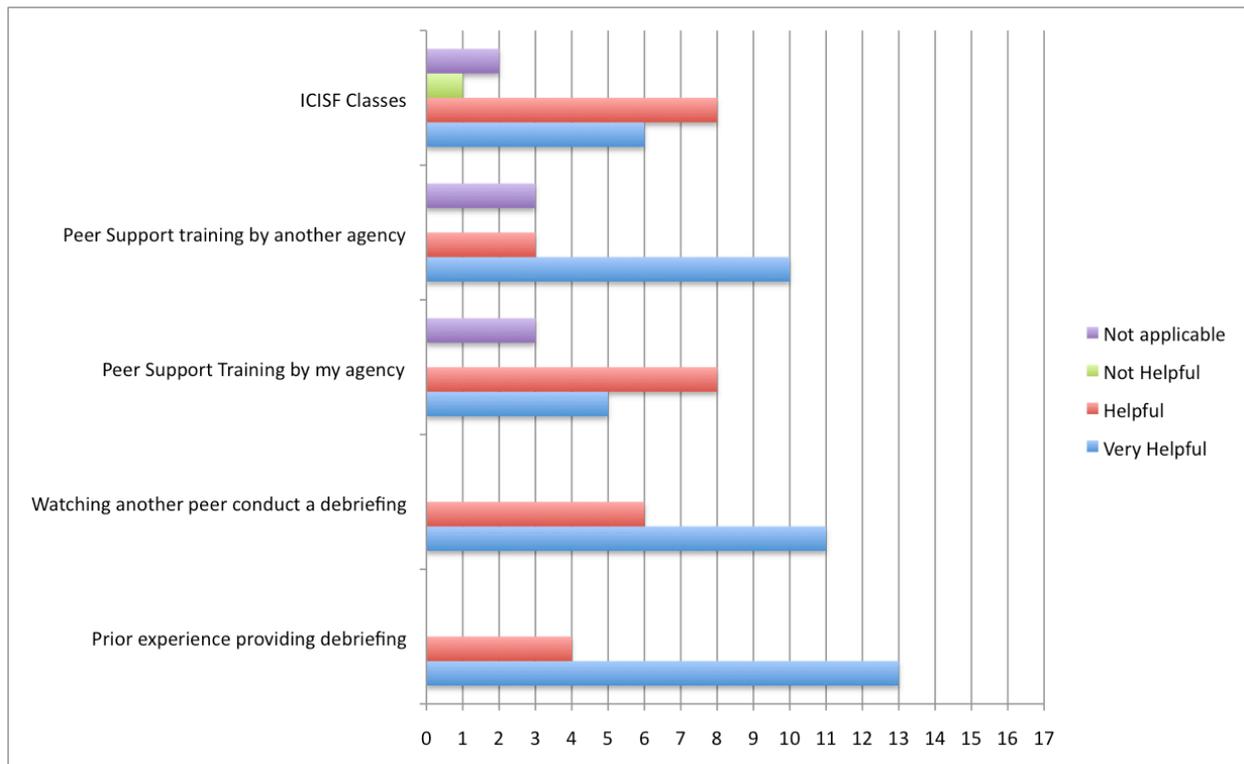
## Method

The author is the psychologist for the San Mateo CISM team and recruited respondents in person and by mail. The master list of debriefers who were sent a survey and according identifying numbers was kept confidential from the author. Materials including informed consent letters, and a self addressed stamped envelope were mailed out between October 2010 and January 2011. The last survey was returned on February 1, 2011.

## Results

The respondents in this study were asked how helpful five different experiences were to their success in providing peer support to public safety personnel involved in the San Bruno explosion.

Graph 1: Which experience was very helpful, helpful or not helpful?



**Discussion**

The current study examined how helpful five different experiences were to a respondent's ability to be successful as a peer supporter. Of those five experiences, prior experience providing a debriefing and watching another peer conducting a debriefing were the most helpful to their success. These data can point peer support team leaders to focus on two ways of training and experience.

First, how does a team decide which members go on call outs for debriefings? If the less experienced peer supporters are not given a chance to provide a debriefing in favor of more experienced peers, will they continue to participate on the team? If the most experienced peers continue to provide debriefings, how will the newer peers ever get that experience which is so helpful?

Second, if a new peer support team member is allowed to train by sitting in on a debriefing perhaps they will be more successful in a future debriefing. Mixing experienced peers with a newer team member may allow that person (i.e. the newer team member) to watch another peer conduct a debriefing. If a new peer support team member is given a chance to watch another peer conduct a debriefing would they stay on the team longer? Could more exposure to real live debriefings instead of trainings keep an individual engaged and involved on a peer support team?

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS:**

Peer Support teams do not have to wait for a large scale incident such as the San Bruno pipeline explosion to ask their team what is helpful in learning to be a better peer support team member. These data are too small of a sample within the debriefing population to make generalizations on a larger scale but are helpful for our three local teams. A similar survey could

be created for any individual team now and future trainings, role-plays, or mentoring experiences could be scheduled based on the team's responses or preferences. A similar survey with other teams which would amass much more data may be helpful for local first responder agencies or large organizations such as ICISF to structure those training classes.