

MTA Provides Counseling for Operators Involved in Accidents

By AMY HOWELL

(Dec. 30, 2002) No Metro Bus or Metro Rail operator wants to be involved in an accident. But, accidents do occur, and when one does, it can be a traumatic event for all who are involved, especially the operator.

Such an event easily can cause bodily shock, with responses that could include nightmares, sweats, erratic heartbeat, dilated pupils, memory loss, crying or anger. An operator may even experience long-term physiological and/or psychological damage as a result of being involved in an accident, preventing them from returning to work or living a normal life.



Dr. Renee Christensen, Carol Allen, Keith Grove and Liz Malle are part of a network of Employee Support Systems Company trauma specialists who assist Metro Bus and Metro Rail operators involved in accidents.

Fortunately, there are trained professionals MTA can call on 24 hours a day, seven days a week to put an operator involved in an accident on the road to recovery, professionally and personally.

"The goal is to get the employee back to work quickly and get their life back to normal," says Dr. Renee Christensen, vice president of Employee Support Systems Company, retained by MTA in 1986 to preside over the agency's Employee Assistance Program.

Christensen worked with United Airlines management and staff after terrorists flew Flight 11 into one of the World Trade Center towers on September 11. She is part of a five-member team that is trained in rail safety and on-call to MTA. A large network of trauma specialists also is available to assist.

Debriefing is essential to healing process

The healing process begins with a debriefing. Held approximately 24 hours after the traumatic event, a debriefing is essential in preventing an operator's body from sustaining long-term physiological or psychological damage.

During the debriefing, a counselor will discuss all aspects of the event with the operator. This helps the operator move disturbing thoughts into long-term memory, allowing the employee to proceed with his or her life.

Follow-up debriefings may be required, depending on the severity of the traumatic event or if conditions exist in the operator's life that may contribute to resistance to recovery.

Although the initial debriefing is between the operator and a counselor, follow-up debriefings may include other operators involved in similar situations who have successfully returned to work.

If an operator does not participate in a debriefing, the long-term effects he or she may experience can include changes in blood pressure, ulcers and panic or anxiety attacks. These could prevent the operator from returning to work or from living a normal life.

"The operator counsels with us until we feel it's safe for him or her to return to work," says Dr. Christensen. "We try to make sure there is a smooth return to work."

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