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Communications Manager Vanessa Smith tends to the comfort and needs of victims of trauma as a newly trained member of Mayor Villaraigosa's Crisis Response Team. She is aided in her effort by Metro Green Line supervisor David Schlesinger, long-standing member of the crisis intervention program, who helps manage the on-call duties of volunteers and leads training sessions in emergency response methods.



Photos by Gayle Anderson

## Bridge Over Troubled Water

- As a new member of the Mayor's Crisis Response Team, Metro's Vanessa Smith brings comfort and aid to victims of trauma.

By GAYLE ANDERSON

(May 11, 2007) The call came on a Sunday, around 4 p.m., just about the time Vanessa Smith, a communications manager in Customer Programs and Services, was about to give her poodle a bath. Smith, newly graduated from the Mayor's Crisis Response Team training, was about to go on her first assignment.

She had 30 minutes to get to a residence in South Los Angeles, where a 69-year-old man had suffered a heart attack and died just moments earlier. As a volunteer member of Los Angeles Mayor Anthony Villaraigosa's Crisis Response Team, her job was to provide for the immediate physical and emotional needs of family and friends on the scene.

"Tending to someone's immediate needs may involve giving them water or making sure they're warm," said Smith, who carries a duffel bag of emergency supplies such as bottled water, a blanket, snacks and even a stuffed animal that may comfort a small child.

Smith is also armed with a host of referrals to guide persons affected by trauma to agencies that can provide grief counseling, housing, and other assistance programs as needed.

The Crisis Response Team is a citywide volunteer program coordinated through the Mayor's Office of the City of Los Angeles. Smith and other volunteers are activated by the Los Angeles Police and Fire Departments to provide immediate onsite crisis intervention, emotional support and referrals to victims and their families involved in a traumatic incident such as major traffic accidents, homicides, natural deaths, suicides, fires, and drive-by shootings.

"My (volunteer) work for the YWCA in Compton helped prepared me for this," said Smith, who, since 2004, has been a first responder to assist victims of sexual assault in the area served by the YWCA and advocates on their behalf with law enforcement agencies, medical facilities and the District Attorney's Office.

No stranger to emergencies and disaster, Smith was a member of the American Red Cross emergency disaster response team in Inglewood, where she helped set up temporary shelters and pitched in with cooking and food preparation during a six-year time period that began in 1998 and continued off and on through 2005. It was her director in that effort, Marie Davis, now the CEO of the American Red Cross in Fresno, who referred Smith to the Mayor's CRT.



Gail Harvey, Director of Customer Relations, congratulates Smith at graduation ceremonies held March 15. Official CRT certificate is signed by Mayor Villaraigosa, Police Chief William Bratton and Fire Dept. Acting Chief Douglas Barry.





As an on-call volunteer, Smith commits to four to six 12-hour shifts per month, which are scheduled apart from her regular weekday working hours. As a back-up manager on an average of once a month, Schlesinger is responsible for assembling a team within 30 minutes of a call.

**Many are called; few are chosen**

After a robust application and selection process – Smith was one of 50 selected out of 200 applicants – volunteers embarked upon an intense training program in January, clocking in 3 ½ hours twice a week for two months.

“We become families,” said Smith, “learning what a crisis is, what types of crisis we will be responding to, and getting educated by the agencies we will interface with, like the coroner’s office, the victim’s assistance program, crisis counselors, psychologists from LAUSD and the police and fire departments.

“They teach us the proper protocol of what to do – how to handle yourself emotionally is a major factor,” said Smith.

One of her trainers is none other than David Schlesinger, a Metro Rail equipment maintenance supervisor and a dedicated member of the CRT since 2001. Singled out for honors for his work in onsite crisis intervention in 2003 by Mayor James Hahn, Schlesinger now helps with the management of the program, dispatching volunteers to the scene and training new members.

Schlesinger enjoyed getting to know Smith during the training. “She is a natural for crisis work. Her warm personality, caring disposition, and calm manner are key traits of a crisis responder,” he said, noting Smith was one of the top students in the class.

“The two-month training program can be difficult, says Schlesinger. “It forces you to face something that may bring up grief, which may be deeply personal. The training puts you on the hot seat to prepare you for a situation where everything is still raw.”

In terms of satisfaction and the reward that comes silently like the calm *after* a fierce storm, volunteers actually get more than they give, said Schlesinger. “We have the privilege of being there to help people in Los Angeles in their time of greatest need,” said Schlesinger, who counts good professional development in his long list of benefits, not the least of which is “the opportunity to meet and work with people like Vanessa Smith.”

When Smith returned home on the Sunday evening of her first call, she stepped back into an environment that was far removed from the day's trauma of loss and grief. "My CRT partner and I debriefed each other over the telephone, to make sure each of us was okay," she said, referring to a standard procedure required after crisis intervention.

"I reflected on the experience," she said, "and felt good about helping the family. Then, I settled in to my own evening."

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