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GOOD STORY

The Virginia Task Force 1 Family Support Services Team

SUMMARY

Fairfax County, Virginia, Fire and Rescue Department's urban search and rescue resource, Virginia Task Force 1 (VATF1), developed the Family Support Services Team (FSST). The FSST provides a variety of support services to VATF1 team members and their families before, during, and after deployments.

BACKGROUND

VATF1 is a group of about 200 dedicated men and women from multiple emergency disciplines, including firefighters, physicians, engineers, and others, who rapidly deploy around the world to provide search and rescue assistance. VATF1 has been deployed nationally to provide assistance during Hurricane Isabel in 2003, the 2003 Space Shuttle Columbia Recovery Mission, the attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, and the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing. The team has also been deployed internationally by the United States Agency for International Development/Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) to provide search and rescue support. These search and rescue missions include assistance to the 1998 American Embassy bombing in Nairobi, Kenya; major earthquakes in Izmit, Turkey; Duce, Turkey; and Toulieu, Taiwan in 1999; and the 2003 earthquake in Bam, Iran.

VATF1 first incorporated the FSST into its deployment protocol just before the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing. The Fairfax County, Virginia, fire chief recognized the growing need for a support system for the VATF1 team and its families and incorporated the FSST into the department's general orders and policies. The FSST relieves other department staff from having to care for the families during deployment. The VATF1 relies on the FSST to provide the necessary resources, services, and support to the entire VATF1 family.

GOALS

The FSST's primary goal is to support the family members of the VATF1 team while they are deployed. This allows task force members to focus on their missions rather than worry about issues at home. The VATF1 FSST strives to strengthen communications, increase families' resilience, and provide support to families during deployment.

DESCRIPTION

Family Support Services Team Members

The FSST is currently composed of eight spouses of task force members who volunteer their time and services to supporting the VATF1 task force members and their families. Though

all FSST members are spouses of VATF1 members, no formal guidelines define who may be a member of the FSST. However, FSST has not encouraged significant others to become FSST members because of potential conflicts that could arise if the relationship ends.

Most team members have other commitments, including careers, other volunteer work, or family. The FSST requires a relatively small time commitment during periods when VATF1 is not activated. During deployments, however, the FSST members spend many hours helping the team mobilize and then preparing for their return.

FSST Services

The FSST offers a variety of services to support the VATF1 and their families pre-deployment, during the mission, and post-deployment. These services include:

- Providing an Orientation and Preparedness Program to the VATF1 members and their families;
- Assisting with the deployment check-in process and mobilization;
- Serving as an information pipeline between the team members and their families during deployment;
- Assisting spouses, families, and task force members with managing everyday life during deployment;
- Providing emotional support and stress management to the VATF1 members and their families;
- Facilitating post-deployment debriefing; and
- Planning social events for task force members and their families.

Orientation and Preparedness Program for Families

The FSST holds a two-part comprehensive orientation program for the task force members and their families. The first part of the program is a pre-selection orientation for those considering joining the task force. Family members are encouraged to attend this part of the program so that it is understood that being a member of the VATF1 is a commitment that affects the member's entire family. The FSST presents an hour long program during this orientation that explains the FSST and the FSST's role in the task force.

The second part of the program is a post-selection orientation program for VATF1 members only. This orientation seeks to prepare new VATF1 members for rapid deployment and separation from their families for up to fourteen days. The FSST also gives a brief presentation explaining its role and providing an overview of its services. Task force members are also supplied with an information packet for their family which includes information about FSST resources, important phone numbers, and a description of FSST services.

Deployment and Mobilization

When the VATF1 is activated, the first step of the mobilization process is check-in, where VATF1 members prepare to deploy. FSST members are responsible for collecting personal items from task force members and securing the member's vehicles. At the end of the mobilization process, task force members hand in their final paperwork to the FSST before deploying.

Information Pipeline

The FSST serves as an information pipeline between the task force members and their families during deployment. Task force members are not permitted to contact their families while deployed because of the confidentiality of the missions. The FSST keeps the families updated by continually providing them with timely and accurate information. Within a few

hours following deployments, FSST members call the task force members' spouses or family members to inform them of the details of the deployment.

Each night while the team is deployed, the Fairfax County Fire Chief holds a teleconference with the VATF1 during which family members can call in to listen to the brief. This teleconference seeks to ensure the families are connected to their loved ones while they are deployed. To maintain the confidentiality of the mission, VATF1 members do not discuss specifics of the mission during this teleconference as they are aware that the families are listening.

Managing Everyday Life

The FSST provides additional services to the families of task force members during deployments to help them manage everyday life. The FSST provides referrals for assistance with household chores, child care, medical care, and guidance for those who wish to speak with the media. The FSST also provides services to task force members with no family at home, such as offering pet care, stopping mail delivery, and paying bills.

Emotional Support and Stress Management

The FSST provides the families with information on stress management. This includes information and resources for coping with a spouse's absence, dealing with children, and readjusting to family life when their spouse returns. The FSST supplies families with information about coping skills and local resources for confidential help and support.

Post-Deployment Debriefing

After the VATF1 returns home, the department holds a debriefing for task force members and their families. The debriefing is usually held at a location that has multiple rooms, such as a hotel or conference center, to accommodate separate break-out sessions. The department conducts separate debriefing sessions for VATF1 members and for families. Each is facilitated by a Fairfax County mental health professional, usually a trained counselor, who is also available for anyone who might have trouble coping or may need additional assistance.

Social Events

The FSST plans social events for task force members and their families. These events provide an opportunity for VATF1 families to get to know each other and to support one another. During deployment, the FSST will hold a barbeque, during which the spouses, significant others, and families of task force members will have a chance to talk with one another about their experience in coping with the deployment of their loved ones.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

Two factors contribute to the FSST's success. First, the team consists of dedicated and committed individuals who volunteer their time to support the VATF1. Second, the team receives strong support from the fire chief and department management. This support ensures that the FSST continues to be recognized by VATF1 members as the primary support system for them and their families.

Resources

The VATF1 FSST is run on a volunteer basis by the spouses of VATF1 members. The team is supported by the Fairfax County, Virginia, Fire and Rescue Department. FSST members are credentialed as volunteer firefighters of the department.

Training

No prior experience or skills are necessary. All team members must complete the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) training provided by a local mental health professional. A few hours of initial training are also required of each new FSST member to orient them with the team.

Links

- Virginia Task Force 1 Website: <http://www.vatf1.org/>

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