

NALC Emergency Response Team already helping letter carriers

Though the members of NALC's Emergency Response Team (ERT) have been trained only since March, the ERT already has been called on to help carriers deal with trauma in post offices throughout the country.

"We're seeing an increase in violence against letter carriers," NALC President Brian L. Renfro said, "but that's not the only trauma carriers are experiencing. All too frequently, I get reports of accidents and deaths of letter carriers on the job. We need to be there for our brothers and sisters when they're facing the aftermath of these critical incidents. And that's why we've created the Emergency Response Team."

NALC held a weeklong training session for the first 29 ERT members March 3-8, teaching them how to offer peer-to-peer support with critical events, such as deaths and life-altering injuries. The training was led by Dr. Jeffrey M. Lating of the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, a leader in providing training on comprehensive crisis intervention and disaster behavioral health services to emergency responders and other professions.

In addition, the team members learned about the postal-specific resources for responding to members in crisis, including through the Employee Assistance Program, the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs, the Mutual Benefit Association, the Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance, the Federal Employees Retirement System and some of the health plans in the Federal Employees Health Benefits program.

"Going to the training was so informative," **Leslie Berner** of Philadelphia, PA Branch 157 said. "We were

all taken out of our safe zone of being branch representatives or shop stewards or anything like that, and we had to leave that all at the door. The training was more of giving our brother and sister carriers who have had something very traumatic happen a shoulder to lean on."

When there's a critical incident that has happened at a station or affecting a member in the station, the local branch president or the national business agent (NBA) alerts Director of Safety and Health Manuel L. Peralta Jr. at NALC Headquarters. Once notice is received, Peralta, Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Mack Julion, and the Headquarters ERT team coordinate the selection of the team members to be deployed, arrange for their travel authorization, contact information and a briefing on the event, and provide notice to the Postal Service that our team will be visiting the work site.

The ERT members are there to provide peer-to-peer support, talk with members on the workroom floor or in private, and in some cases to meet with the family of the affected letter carrier. Their role is to assist members and the family by providing emotional first aid and guiding them to the available resources in the aftermath of the traumatic event. They offer peer-to-peer encouragement from trained union members who are there to listen, understand, and help.

"Whether we're talking with the family or the co-workers, we're basically trying to let them share their emotions and what they're going through, and let them know whatever they are feeling is OK," Berner said. "We're also looking for signs of people who may have just fallen into a deep scenario that we're not qualified to

help with. In those situations, we try to encourage them to seek other alternatives, whether it is EAP or counseling through their health care."

John Collins of Zanesville, OH Branch 63 was in the March ERT training when he got the first call. "While we were in the training for that week, we learned of the shooting," he said of an Ohio letter carrier who was killed while driving his postal vehicle, in what the Postal Service called a targeted attack. "We finished up training on Friday and actually were in the delivery unit by that Monday."

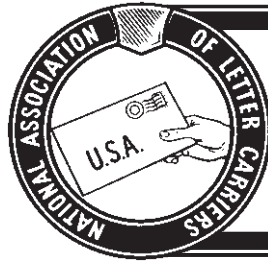
The ERT members reached out to the branch president "to get a pulse on what was going on with him and how things were at that stage, and basically just set up some logistics stuff," Collins said. They brought chairs into the station and set them up in a circle. Then they told carriers that if they wanted to, they could come and sit and talk about their experience or what was bothering them.

"They were very responsive," Collins said. "I believe just the presence of having someone there that's peer-to-peer and a letter carrier, the same as them, to be able to talk to them—I think they opened up more."

Brooke Bollom, a letter carrier from Bismarck, ND Branch 957, has been deployed twice.

"We're just there as an ear, somebody to listen and to just allow them to get it off their chest, whatever is bothering them," she said, "whether it has to do with the incident or something personal."

Bollom said the process starts with the team members being introduced and explaining what they're there for. "Then I just walk around the office,"



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she explained. “The ones that turn around, you start a conversation. It’s just asking them how they’re doing. And a lot of them, if they want to talk to you, they’re going to initiate that conversation. And then we go from there.”

But there also are letter carriers who don’t want to talk, and that’s OK, too. “I just let them know that I’ll be there for a couple of days if they feel they need to. And a lot of those will come up and approach me by the second or third day,” she said.

Sometimes the carriers are filled with doubts. “You know that they were really good friends with the person, they knew them really well, and they just need somebody to hear their feelings,” Bollom said.

She’s had carriers talk about what they think should or could have been done to help the victim. “There’s so many different scenarios that could come up and that do come up in these conversations. Every carrier is different.”

Others Bollom has talked to are initially angry, expressing things such as that the victim didn’t get the help they needed or that not enough is done to help protect carriers from violence. However the member expresses their emotions, Bollom takes these opportunities to validate the member’s feelings.

In one deployment location, co-workers noticed that a letter carrier wasn’t at his case. They found him unresponsive on the floor of the locker room and tried to perform CPR but weren’t able to save him. “It was a rough situation,” Branch 157 President **Tim Mulvenna** said.

He went to the station as soon as he heard and gave a floor talk and tried

to help however he could. A few days later, the ERT members arrived.

Berner had one woman from the station angrily ask, “Why don’t you just leave us alone?” Thanks to her training, Berner knew to leave the woman alone, give her some time, and later explained to her, “We’re here because we care. We’re definitely not here to keep stirring up bad feelings.” They talked for half an hour, and, by the end, she gave Berner a hug.

“It made me feel like, hopefully, something was accomplished by this,” Berner said.

In another situation, one carrier told Berner that the letter carrier who died had helped him when he had been hired. And he always came in with a joke—often corny ones. “Before I started with the post office, I was a bartender, so I know a million corny jokes,” Berner shared with the group. And they started telling corny jokes to each other. “For these people, they said it helped them start feeling a little better,” she said.

Because the ERT members are all letter carriers and NALC members, Mulvenna said the other carriers felt like, “They’re one of us. So, I think they’re just more open to speaking to them.”

Mulvenna attended the funeral the following week and talked to a lot of the carriers from the station. “And they just said, ‘Hey, thanks a lot for sending that team in and those people in. They were easy to talk to.’ I think that one-on-one time was effective.”

The Branch 157 president said that he was impressed by the experience: “I thought it worked out pretty well, especially for a first time.”

In their deployment, Collins and his teammate walked around and talked to

all of the carriers, including the rural letter carriers, to ask them how they were doing. “We had a room set up, and they could go back and talk to us individually, and several of them did, including a supervisor,” Collins said. Those postal co-workers praised the NALC ERT for trying to help everyone—not just the city letter carriers—in the station. Collins said that’s the way it should be. “It’s a postal family,” he said.

While the ERT members are normally in a station for two to three days, they can ask for more time if it’s needed. Once the team members are done talking to the letter carriers at the station, they come back and do a debriefing with each other. That way, they get a more complete view of what’s going on and can relay that information to Headquarters.

“It’s one of those things, you don’t want to be deployed,” Collins said. “But when we were done, I really felt like, ‘OK, that did some good.’”

ERT members are trained in specialized techniques to deal with the wide range of emotions, heavy atmosphere, uncertainty, and sensitive circumstances that surround traumatic events. These NALC representatives connect with members in an emotional way that goes beyond a traditional contractual role.

“The members of our union, if given the skills, the knowledge and the opportunity to help other members, they will do that,” President Renfroe said in announcing the program last year. “This is something that is going to be really beneficial to all of our members.”

NALC members can reach out to the ERT through their branch president or by contacting their NBA’s office. **PR**