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## Local chaplain program serves Monroe community

By: Chris Hendrickson November 11, 2014 Monroe News News



When people think of first responders, they typically think of firefighters, paramedics and law enforcement officers.

### WEATHER

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In Monroe, there is another group of individuals available to offer aid to those who find themselves in tragic circumstances – pastors.

Monroe's Police and Fire Chaplain Program has been providing chaplain services to the Monroe community for over 30 years. The program began in 1983 with Sister Barbara Geib of St. Mary of the Valley Catholic Church, and at that time, was only affiliated with Monroe Police Department.

Currently there are five volunteer pastors providing pastoral services to the city of Monroe. The chaplains each have a department-issued pager, and are on-call 24 hours a day.

Pastors Michael Hanford and Tim Wheatley visited Monroe City Council in October to provide an overview of the chaplain program. Pastor Hanford joined the Monroe chaplaincy in June of 1998 and has watched the program evolve and expand to offer services to the fire department as well as the police.

"The fire department came on board and embraced us in 2008, and we have a working relationship with both departments at this time," said Pastor Hanford.

Chaplains acquire crisis-specific training through the Washington Criminal Justice Training Center. The intensive week-long training program includes 23 sessions which cover such topics as the philosophy of chaplaincy; the anatomy of crisis; sensitivity and diversity; death notifications; ethics; crime scene investigations; forensics; post-traumatic stress; safety incident command; line-of-duty death protocols and much more.

"A chaplain is basically saying, 'I'm here to wait with you, to be with you, I want to support you, I want to be a ray of sunshine during this dark time,'" said Wheatley. "Our primary job when we come into a situation is to assess that situation in terms of the needs of the victims and survivors, and then to transfer them to their own support system or the next level of support."

Currently, the chaplain program operates in conjunction with Monroe's police and fire departments on a volunteer basis, and is unable to receive financial support via these publically-funded agencies. Wheatley explained that, in some communities, chaplains have been able to establish nonprofit organizations, which has enabled them to be more dedicated to the services they provide.

"Then they're able to actually work full-time for the community they serve," said Wheatley. "We're hoping that someday some of us will have the opportunity to do that because it's really in our heart to represent a standard of excellence in serving the community."

Pastor Hanford shared that, while they are frequently called into difficult and troubling situations, the pastors are able to receive a lot of joy through their service, as well.

"The fun part is the 'ride-alongs' where we connect with the officers and firefighters and EMTs, and get to know them as people, so that in a crisis we're able to help them effectively," said Hanford.

The chaplains participate in numerous events throughout the city of Monroe including National Night Out, Walk Your Child to School Day, National Day of Prayer, and the Police and Fire Appreciation Day lunch. The Police and Fire Appreciation Day lunch is held every November in conjunction with the Police and Fire Appreciation Week, which takes place from Sunday Nov. 16 through Saturday, Nov. 22.

Pastor Hanford shared that they attempt to meet as many of the community needs as they possibly can. They've helped organize groups to address drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and gang awareness. In 2013, they facilitated the Domestic Violence Awareness Candlelight Vigil, which honored Monroe domestic violence victim Jacoba Ramirez-Rodriguez.

Hanford expressed that he has been honored to serve Monroe throughout fatality automobile accidents, suicides and other tragic events.

"We find it a privilege to be a part of caring and loving and putting an arm around this community," said Pastor Hanford. "We love this community, we love the people of this community, and we love the youth of this community."

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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