

PROJECT COPE: Healing the Heroes of 9/11

On October 23, 2007, the Center for Bioethics featured **Dr. Ellen Stevenson**, Clinical Director of the Department of Psychiatry, and her presentation of **Project COPE: Healing the Heroes of 9/11**. Dr. Stevenson's presentation described the process and outcomes of an unprecedented and unique partnership between the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University and the New York City Police Foundation to address psychological trauma in police personnel following the September 11, 2001 attacks. This remarkable partnership convened academia, the private, and the public interest working together to promote the mental health of a very large population who had been profoundly traumatized by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath.

The NYPD, having observed lessons in post-traumatic stress disorders suffered by police officers in Oklahoma City following the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building, sought a model system to treat its entire force of 55,000 personnel and their families following 9/11. The idea for the system emerged from the concern that police officers, surrounded by a culture of machismo or because they were overwhelmed by other duties, would not seek the critical psychiatric help they needed. The daunting task was complicated by myriad obstacles, including cultural and language barriers, police officers' fears of disclosure that could hinder career advancement, and cost.

Early and critical support for the Project came from Dr. Gerald Fischbach, then-Dean of Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr. Fred Kass, currently Executive Vice-Chair of the Department of Psychiatry, and from Pamela Delaney, President and CEO of the Police Foundation. The partnership between the Department of Psychiatry and the Police Foundation led to the training of over 600 volunteers who reached out to police personnel and their families. The Police Foundation produced a moving ten-minute informational video for police personnel featuring Police Commissioner Kelly and highly-regarded members of the force, which Dr. Stevenson played during her presentation. Recognizing the prevalent atmosphere of machismo within the police ranks, Project COPE volunteers urged officers to seek initial help not necessarily only for themselves, but for their spouses and children. They facilitated at educational training sessions, distributed "COPE cards" containing the Project COPE hotline number and other Project information, and established a relationship with police unions.

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The Project's momentum increased as police personnel began calling the Project COPE hotline to seek help for themselves and for their families. Common complaints included relationship stress, exposure to trauma, depression, stress management, job problems, general anxiety, anger, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Dr. Stevenson presented a vignette whose story line was composed of different scenarios observed across cases encountered by Project staff. The total number of calls to the Project COPE hotline reached its peak in 2003, though hotline staffers report a continuing influx of 9/11-related calls.

According to Dr. Stevenson, the Project's success was derived significantly from education outreach efforts, the superb leadership and support of the Police Foundation under the direction of Pamela Delaney, the accessibility of the Project COPE telephone hotline, friendly and polite clinical staff, and support from key police personnel. Dr. Stevenson also acknowledged the support of New York Senator Hillary Clinton and New York Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, who obtained federal funding for the New York City Police Foundation to support Project COPE. Senator Clinton's staff member, Case Button, and Congresswoman Maloney's staff member, Joe Soldevere, were in attendance at Dr. Stevenson's presentation.

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The presentation concluded with a dynamic question-and-answer session.