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Helping Survivors: The Role of Other Organizations

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Living

With

Grief

After Sudden

Loss

Suicide

Homicide

Accident

Heart Attack

Stroke

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FOREWORD BY **JACK D. GORDON, PRESIDENT**

HOSPICE FOUNDATION OF AMERICA

Helping Survivors: The Role of Other Organizations



COMMENTARY BY KENNETH J. DOKA, PH.D.

Whenever there is sudden, and especially traumatic, loss, a variety of institutions, among them the media, may have roles that will either complicate or facilitate the grief of survivors. A number of chapters have emphasized that media can often be intrusive, adding to the difficulties of the bereaved. In fact, the power of media coverage is that it makes viewers virtually secondary victims, bringing the trauma of the loss right into their homes.

In a sensitive article, Brian Kates offers a balanced perspective on the role of media. Kates is a working journalist as well as a professor who teaches journalistic ethics. He also is an officer in a family-owned corporation that publishes *The American Funeral Director*, allowing him a special sensitivity to grief. Kates notes that laws do not really provide much guidance. He sees the decisions on how to cover tragedy as essentially an ethical issue balancing the rights of the public with the needs of those immediately affected by the loss. Kates points out that media coverage does not have to be divisive, but can be healing if it is reported carefully and with editors consciously monitoring the message.

Schools are critical in the healing process as well since they are often the places where children and adolescents will process losses. Robert Stevenson reminds us that schools cannot just expect to respond to a crisis, they must constantly prepare for such event. This is critical because one of the key problems in traumatic loss is a perceived lack of control. By effective and immediate intervention, school programs can diminish that sense of helplessness. Stevenson notes that many of these principles have relevance beyond traumatic loss and that proactive efforts by schools can help stem the epidemics of violence and AIDS that reach into our schools.

Laura Boyd, both a therapist and an Oklahoma state representative, provides a case study of the ways that government can

respond to mass trauma. The "Oklahoma standard" showed that tough, thorough and caring leadership is essential to assist individuals in taking care of themselves. Boyd notes that the government must respond in both symbolic and substantive ways. Substantive ways in the Oklahoma City bombing included actions such as coordinating efforts and arranging assistance and compensation for victims and survivors. But equally important were symbolic actions, thanking people involved in responding to the disaster or discouraging talk shows that incited hate. And again Boyd, much like Stevenson, notes that certain actions including healthcare and insurance reform are active ways to facilitate recovering efforts.

Throughout the chapters in the book, there is a recognition of the role of ritual as a tool for healing when disaster affects a nation. These rituals have to be nationwide. As we discussed earlier, the John F. Kennedy funeral was an act of national healing. Stevenson addresses the need for commemoration. This provides a way, with media assistance, for symbolic action by government officials. The commemorative service in Oklahoma city, for example, moved us as a people, Kates affirms, from "Terror" to "Together in the Heartland."