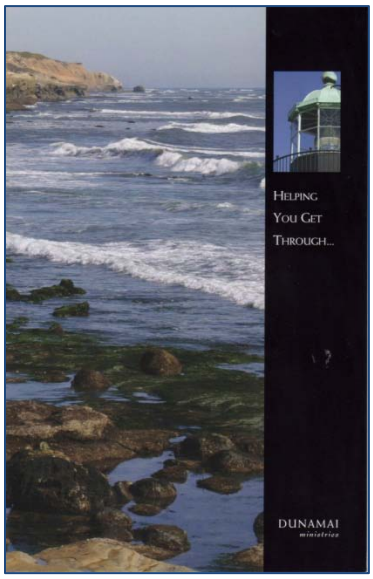
BEREAVEMENT CENTER

The San Diego County Medical Examiner's Bereavement Center offers a host of services to those who are going through the grieving process following the sudden, traumatic, and unexpected loss of a loved one. Started in July 2007, the Bereavement Center offers grief counseling, personal assistance, and volunteer chaplains from an array of religions to those who have lost a loved one. The Center is run by a volunteer chaplain who facilitates counseling services to thousands of clients each year.

The 3,000 deaths investigated by the Medical Examiner each year are often sudden, unexpected, and traumatic. Families experiencing this event are in a period of high vulnerability. It has been documented that death from unnatural causes directly influences the nature and course of bereavement. For individuals bereaved through unnatural causes the suddenness and lack of anticipation adversely influences their internal world and coping abilities, thus constituting trauma. There is also evidence that unnatural dying presents a greater incidence of symptoms of posttraumatic stress, victimization, and intrusive thoughts than in populations surviving death by a natural cause. Additionally, increased alcohol consumption, smoking, and use of tranquilizers and other medicines are well documented among the bereaved, especially among people who had used these substances prior to the loss. Thus, it is apparent that the bereavement state can adversely affect health and can exacerbate and precipitate health-compromising behaviors.



Prior to the inception of the Bereavement Center, families enduring the bereavement process were an un-served population. Given the aforementioned mental and physical problems that grieving can pose, the Medical Examiner's Office recognized the need to establish a set of much needed services. As a result, the Bereavement Center was established to fill this gap in services and help mitigate the adverse affects that an untimely death can pose. As steward of the Bereavement Center, the chaplain provides an array of services to families who recently lost a loved one, including counseling services, cremation assistance, and a 27-page grief resource booklet titled "Helping You Get Through…" Families who encounter the loss of a loved one are plagued with many questions. "What should I

expect next?" "What resources are available?" "How do I deal with insurance companies?" These are some of the typical questions raised by families going through the grieving process.

At each death notification the booklet is provided to each next of kin by a Medical Examiner Investigator along with the contact number for the Center for Grief Care and Education at San Diego Hospice and Palliative Care. The booklet contains an array of subjects, including available support groups, how to help children during a time of loss, the first steps after death (a five page checklist), a funeral checklist, and much more.

The Bereavement Center also offers grief counseling services at no cost through the Center for Grief Care and Education at San Diego Hospice and Palliative Care. The Bereavement Center and DUNAMAI Ministries also partner to provide cremation assistance for certain qualified families. DUNAMAI Ministries receives private donations to help pay for cremation costs for families that cannot afford to do so.

The results of the Bereavement Center are remarkable. Most of the successes of the Bereavement Center's work are not quantifiable. The degree to which the Bereavement Center provides comfort to grieving families is immeasurable. However, there are a few quantifiable measures of success. Through December 2010 over 9,750 grief resource booklets had been provided to grieving families.

In the first 16 months of operation the Center has provided free counseling services and care to 227 families. Through December 2010, 126 cremations had been paid for. The Bereavement Center also offers clergy support for funeral arrangements. And perhaps the most touching, is that the Bereavement Center's chaplain follows-up on every local case with a phone call to the family to offer condolences and answer any questions they may have.