

Reaching out for 9th Ward Recovery

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As residents continue to rebuild in New Orleans' 9th Ward, many with the assistance from volunteers, the grind of long-term recovery can wear down the spirit of all those involved. Nadine Bean, a visiting professor in the Tulane School of Social Work, has launched a center that provides emotional, social and spiritual support on a walk-in basis.



Nadine Bean, a visiting professor in the Tulane School of Social Work, provides emotional, social and spiritual support services at All Souls Episcopal Church in the 9th Ward of New Orleans. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Bean, an associate professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania's master of social work program, came to New Orleans as a volunteer following Hurricane Katrina. She began working with lowernine.org, a rebuilding organization that “pairs wood and nail-and-hammer rebuilding with mind, spirit and community rebuilding,” Bean says.

Bean has worked for many years with the American Red Cross, providing disaster mental health services and training individuals in psychological first aid. Her first deployment from Philadelphia was to ground zero in Manhattan shortly after Sept. 11, 2001.

“The term 'mental health' still has such a stigma associated with it, particularly in the African American community,” Bean says.

To reach out to both residents and volunteers working to rebuild houses in the 9th Ward, Bean is partnering with All Souls Episcopal Church. She finds that many people are more receptive to receiving social support services that are offered as both emotional- and spiritual-support services in collaboration with clergy.

Bean has been training volunteers and community leaders in how to provide psychological first aid — recognizing the signs of mental distress among residents, offering them psychological comfort and referring them to longer-term mental health services if necessary.

She also helps volunteers cope with a type of burn-out called secondary or vicarious traumatization.

“Perhaps the best term is 'compassion fatigue',” Bean says. “Many of the volunteers are very young — right out of college — and they come with admirable, incredible passion for this work. A couple of them have been here for more than two years. They still care very deeply, but they have less and less energy and effectiveness.”

Some show signs that they need a “mental health tune-up,” Bean says. The symptoms include not sleeping well, nightmares, risky behaviors such as drinking too much alcohol, and not taking care of themselves. Bean provides individual and group counseling.

Bean hopes to obtain funding to find a full-time social worker for the drop-in clinic who can carry the project forward when she returns to her teaching position in Pennsylvania, and she would like to have students in the Tulane [master of social work program](#) work at the clinic.

“It's not enough to rebuild structures. We need to help re-weave the social fabric of the community,” Bean says. “I've seen how resilient and strong people here are — and the astronomical need for mental health services.”