

Stress managers aid Sandy caregivers

November 19, 2012 3:30 AM Nick Marinello
mr4@tulane.edu

On Nov. 16, fire chief Bob Sinnott posted the following on the website of the Silverton (New Jersey) Volunteer Fire Department No. 1: "Our community was beautiful and now so gloomy. We are pulling together to help each other empty our homes to rebuild them. We all have lost something but will restore our community."



Responders in a disaster zone often suffer from "primary and secondary trauma," says Tulane traumatologist Kathleen Regen Figley. (Photo by Julie Dermansky)

The Silverton fire department is located in Tom's River, N.J., an area devastated when Hurricane Sandy blew ashore in late October. Sinnott's words, evoking sadness, resignation and determination, are indicative of the complexity of emotions experienced by responders and caregivers in a disaster zone.

"Silverton's fire department is experiencing what we call primary and secondary trauma," says Kathleen Regen Figley, a master traumatologist and adjunct professor in the Tulane University [School of Social Work](#). "These folks have lost everything themselves and also are working with people in their community who have been impacted."

Figley has been involved with the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology in coordinating the deployment of specially trained teams to work with members of the

fire department.

“There are a dozen people who will be going up there in the next two weeks,” says Figley. These workers are trained traumatologists who will be focused on what she calls “compassion stress management,” which involves working with responders and caregivers who are experiencing secondary trauma.

“We send the compassion stress managers to help bring them back to a stronger level of functioning,” says Figley.

Green Cross responders also did house-to-house checks with the Silverton fire department to get services to the community.

The discipline of traumatology is relatively new, says Figley, and was coined by her husband, [Charles Figley](#), founder of the Green Cross and holder of the Paul Henry Kurzweg Distinguished Chair in the Tulane School of Social Work.

“I had no idea I would enjoy working disaster,” says Kathleen Figley, who worked in emergency management for a decade before working with the Green Cross. “That sounds strange, but I liken it to being an emergency room doc. You don't think about him unless you need him.”