

## Harris County's volunteer chaplains provide compassion

By **Anita Hassan** Updated 10:22 pm, Saturday, July 28, 2012



Don Hawkins, a chaplain at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, is trained in bereavement counseling.

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Don Hawkins got the call about 11 a.m. All he was given was the man's name and two addresses. As soon as he hung up the phone, Hawkins rushed to his car.

Both addresses were in northwest Harris County, close to Hawkins' own home. The first one was incorrect. Moments after he arrived at the second address, Hawkins knew he had the right house.

A chaplain for 18 years, he has been in his fair share of crisis situations. He spent about five years on Texas' death row, counseling convicts before they received lethal injections. He's worked on the ground in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.

But, making this call on this day was a first.

Shortly after arriving at the home, Hawkins stood in the living room where a woman, her husband and her teenage daughter sat and stared at him curiously. Only the woman's husband spoke some English.

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"Do you know Santos Arguenta-Coreas?" Hawkins asked.

He was the woman's brother.

Hawkins proceeded. He told them there had been an accident earlier that morning on July 19. Her brother had died.

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The woman's husband translated for her. She immediately began to weep.

For Hawkins, though, the task didn't end there. He would stay as long as the family needed him.

Hawkins is one of several chaplains, trained in bereavement counseling, who have volunteered as part of a new death notification program, in which they deliver the news to deceased's next of kin by going to their homes.

If Arguenta-Coreas had died less than a week before, his family would have received word via a matter-of-fact telephone call from a forensic investigator at the **Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences**. That's the agency that makes at least a hundred death notifications a month.

"It (a phone call) seems very impersonal, for such a personal thing that you're telling a family," said **Bethany Bless**, who works as a forensic investigator at the Institute of Forensic Sciences, formerly the medical examiner's office, which oversees the program. "It's hard to portray compassion over the phone line, and because of the size of Harris County and the case list we have every year, it's impossible for the investigators to go in person."

#### *Hoping to go 24/7*

The program has 40 chaplains who volunteer with the Harris County Sheriff's Office and have been trained by the Institute of Forensic Science.

For now, chaplains will make local notifications between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m, Monday through Friday, accompanied by a sheriff's deputy for safety. The agency hopes to have enough chaplains one day to be a 24/7 operation.

"We wanted to make sure that the people who are actually going are trained with working with families and working with hardships," said Bless, who helped spearhead the program. "That's why we chose chaplains."

Being able to offer grief services, something forensic investigators are not qualified to do, is one of the factors that prompted the Institute of Forensic Sciences to start the program, which began July 18.

#### *Concern for next of kin*

Bless said another reason the agency wanted to offer in-person notifications is because investigators have no idea the

condition of the person on the other end of the phone. There is no way to know if someone is driving or has health problems and if hearing about the death could potentially cause another tragedy.

**Michele Hunt**, who has worked at the agency as a forensic investigator for 10 years, recalled notifying one woman by phone about her mother's passing. The woman was in such shock, Hunt said, that she stayed on the phone with her for nearly 45 minutes.

"I really felt like she needed a medic there," Hunt said. "Through the phone I could tell what distress she was in."

Bless said the chaplaincy program served a need for not only those receiving death notifications, but also for investigators making the calls.

"We've had families that have started yelling, and the investigator may sometime get frustrated because the family's not hearing what they are saying and keep asking the same question over and over," she said. "Because they are not trained to understand those reactions, it can cause frustrations."

Forensic investigators often work alongside law enforcement, helping to develop crime scene information at car crashes and murders.

Having to methodically conduct a death investigation and then tell a family member they've lost a loved one is emotionally stressful for investigators, Bless said.

"Trying to go back and forth, it's exhausting," she said.

#### *Receiving thanks*

That day, Hawkins stayed with Arguenta-Coreas' family for nearly an hour, making sure he could answer all the questions he could and finding someone who had the answers when he didn't. More than anything, Hawkins said, he just listened.

At one point, the dead man's brother-in-law looked at Hawkins.

"Thank you," Hawkins said the man told him. "Thank you for coming to my door."

When he left, the family stood at the doorway and watched as Hawkins walked to his car. He knew that there was still more pain the family would have to process.

"When I leave, other things will happen behind that door," he said. "... all it is, is to help people go through that burden for a moment."

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