

# CISM for the Volunteer Fire Department

*By Gary Lillie*

It was the late 1970s. The only "Jaws of Life" was located in the major city in Oklahoma. One volunteer fire department decided to begin raising funds to purchase the first set of Jaws of Life to be owned and operated in North Central Oklahoma by a volunteer department. The Nash, OK community caught the vision and soon a set of Hurst Tools were delivered. Within a few days of delivery of the Hurst Tools the Nash Volunteer Firefighters were called to a fatality car accident in Grant County to extricate the survivors.

That one call became the first of many fatalities and near fatality accidents where the Nash FD were called to extricate both the living and the dead, however, those major incidents began to take a toll. The volunteers decided to do two things. First they made a decision to participate in a program called "Critical Incident Stress Debriefing" and secondly they asked a local minister to join their department and serve as Chaplain. Both concepts were new to the volunteer fire service.

My first call as their Chaplain/firefighter involved a single vehicle accident with 2 fatalities; a young mother along with her small child that had been strapped into a child's car seat and placed in the open bed of her pickup. Once again the Jaws of Life were called and Nash responded. Following the incident, a CISM Team was called to do a debriefing for our department, my first. That team from Midwest City Fire Department traveled 2 hours one direction just to do our debriefing.

As a result of that one debriefing there was a tremendous benefit to myself and many of my firefighters, I decided I wanted to become trained in CISM. Fortunately, a class was being offering in Oklahoma City and my FD paid my way to that training. Several others from north central Oklahoma also attended and we were able to get acquainted. Although we did not have enough trained people to form a team, it was a huge start. We all went back to our departments and areas and began encouraging others to become trained. Soon we had enough Firefighters, EMT's, Chaplains and Mental Health personnel in North Central Oklahoma to form our own team. That was almost 20 years ago. north into Kansas, east to Kaw City, OK and south to Kingfisher, basically all of north central and most of northwest OK. We have debriefed Fire Departments, both paid and volunteer; Emergency Medical Services departments, Law Enforcement agencies, schools and even a bank requested our team following an armed robbery.

Our goal is simple, we want to help others cope with the most horrific of events and to let them know that what they are feeling and experiencing is a "normal reaction to an abnormal event". We still follow the basic outline and bring 3 peers, 1 chaplain and 1 mental health professional to each debriefing. None of us are paid and we never charge for conducting a debriefing. Our desire is to help others in the same way we were helped.

Today the Oklahoma State Fire Chaplains organization (<http://okfirechaplains.org>) continues to provide CISM training on a regular basis so that more volunteers can be trained to help our brothers and sisters. And yes, I still respond to calls where not only do I set up a debriefing for my firefighters, but for myself as well. I haven't kept track of all the fatality accidents and other tragic calls I have worked, but without a strong CISM team in our area, I doubt I would still be answering the fire call.