

I participated in the San Angelo Incident for three consecutive weeks in April 2008. When I first received notification from my supervisor to participate in the incident, I was anxious to take part as I had just received my licensure as a Licensed Professional Counselor, less than seven days prior. However, when I arrived on site with the women and children, I quickly realized that there was nothing in any textbook that could prepare me for what I was about to experience. To sum it up, I felt as if I was working with my hands were tied behind my back, a blindfold on, and I was leading going on human instinct. I tossed all of my years of experience and textbook knowledge as I merely tried to engage in conversation with the women and children to build a rapport to gain their trust, and help them process what they were going through, and what they were going to experience in the days to follow. It ultimately boiled down to treating people with human respect. And you do not have to have advance training or higher education to do that.

When I arrived in San Angelo the first week and participated in the debriefings, I was taken back by the information that was given to us by the representative of the Command Station. We were informed of how resistant and difficult this population of women and children were. We were given instructions to "merely observe", and be prepared for responses such as "I want to talk to my lawyer or not without my lawyer". The information given was quite the contrary. We informed that our shifts would be twelve hour shifts, from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

The first week in San Angelo, I found the women and children to be quite pleasant. They were reserved, yet friendly when spoken to. Much of the women's first comments were, "When are we going home?" or "What is going to happen to us?". All I could say was, "I'm not sure, but I can inquire and pass on the information when it is available". Much of the women stated that the children were missing their school lessons and their fathers. They also asked when they could get their personal cell phones returned to them. The informed me that their cell phones had been taken from them. When I attempted to ask the shelter manager for a phone or if I could let the woman use a cell phone, she commented to me (with the woman present, behind me), "I already told you, no cell phones". The representative further stated to me "she is being manipulative, I've already told her no". I was embarrassed when I turned around to speak to the woman because she heard the CPS worker's comment.

The first three to four days that I was present at the Concho Valley Fort, the women and children were all well mannered and extremely cooperative. The unit of the Pavilion where I was stationed, my task was to offer comfort and support to the women and children, referred to as "guests". I worked alongside two BCFS workers and at least four CPS workers. Four CPS workers were stationed at the two doors of the unit. For the most part, they sat by the doors and observed the "guests" who were either discreetly breast feeding their children, on their cot, schooling/teaching their children, or feeding their children with food, drinks, and snacks. I was asked by the unit leader to sit outside of the unit, to monitor who was coming and going out. Most of my day was spent taking shift with MH workers due to the hot sun.

The second week I participated with the San Angelo Incident, the "guests" were housed at the Pavilion and Coliseum. My task on the second trip was to comfort and offer support to the children who were escorted to the Coliseum, and separated from their mothers. Most of the children stayed united with each other. The older children comforted the younger children when they began to cry and ask for their mothers. The older female children took on the role of mothers. They hugged and consoled the smaller children. It was touching to watch the intense bond these children had, regardless of the fact that they were not all blood siblings, but difficult at the same time. I found it extremely difficult to do my task of consoling and offer comfort when I was an emotional wreck myself. Even to be an observer at the facility was difficult. I could see the women and children being escorted by a string of law enforcement into the facility. They were escorted from the Coliseum into the Pavilion. CPS workers approached the "guests" and asked the women to follow them into another room while the children were asked to follow other CPS workers and escorted them to the other end of the facility. As the children became scared and realized that their mothers were not going to return to them, they began to cry and become emotional. CPS responded by placing (bed) cots upright and building a wall so that the children could not see what was going on at the other end of the facility. At one point, when the children were all separated, one male child who was about 9 years old, broke away from the rest of the children who were all hurtled together, being comforted by each other, and walked up to a police officer. I heard him say, "You're the police, help us. Help me get my mother back. She has done nothing wrong". The police officer could only respond by saying, "I can't do that." Once the children were gathered in one half of the facility with wall-to-wall cots forming a wall, there were at least four policemen, over eight CPS workers and myself and another MH worker. Our job at that point was to merely observe, as the children found relief and comfort among themselves, and it seemed intrusive to disrupt the grieving process that was occurring. Within about an hour, our next task was to help CPS workers escort children in pairs of two to the restrooms, a few feet away from where they were to the restroom. For about thirty to forty-five minutes, I made repeated trips to the restroom with children and then escorted them back to their area. I also found it intrusive to go into the restroom and wait for the children to finish.

The third week in San Angelo was perhaps the most difficult. My main task was to escort the "guests" to the different shelters for both women and children. The bus I was on had two women and the rest were children ranging, from infants who were nursing to children ages 7 and 8 years old. The women were escorted on to the bus first and they were settled in with their infants. The children then joined them, in tears running to the two women. Within seconds, the two women had five or six children they were comforting. After about ten minutes on the road, the children were no longer crying. They were in awe of the bus and the sites on the way to San Antonio. One woman on the bus had a notebook and she documented all of the names of the workers on the bus and the names of each town we drove into. She commented that she wanted to know how to get to San Antonio so she could get her children back. CPS workers on my bus were helping the two women and children on the bus. At one point, I joined a conversation of two young and relatively new CPS workers. They were upset with their leader on the bus because they believed they were asked to purposely mislead the women about if and

when they could get the custody of their children back. Although the bus ride was only about three hours, the trip seemed much longer than that. Children were throwing up on the bus and the smell was unpleasant. The smell coming from the restroom was noticeable from the middle of the bus. Each bus had at least one EMS worker, a police officer, six CPS workers, one lead CPS worker and two mental health workers, and guests.

One of the MH workers from the Bexar County informed me on the way back to San Angelo from San Antonio that she was helping a child on the bus when she was interrupted by a CPS worker who told her she was told not to allow MH workers interact with the children because they (MH workers) did not want to work with the children. The MH worker interjected and said that was not true. The only thing she did not like was the fact that she was not allowed (by CPS) to work with the children.

Overall, the opportunity to work with this population of people was invaluable. It was unique in the sense that I was able to observe the grieving process, daily, for several hours per day, for at least three weeks. And through it all, the "guest" managed their grief with dignity and grace, given the circumstances. In the grand scheme of things, there was evident deterioration with regard to behavior, nutrition, anguish, health, etc. However, the "guests" never showed any signs of disrespect to anyone, even if they were not given the respect, in return.