

local news

To the rescue

A new Crisis Response Team will be there for sexual minorities who are the victims of crimes or accidents

by Teri Ventura

The Sexual Minority Roundtable Crisis Response Team was officially launched Oct. 11, on National Coming Out Day. The team works in partnership with Portland police officers who respond to calls for assistance involving sexual minorities. It is the first of its kind in the United States and is mandated by the Partnership Agreement, signed Oct. 11, 1994, between the Portland Police Bureau and the sexual minorities community.

The Crisis Response Team—an all-volunteer group—provides emotional and practical support to sexual minority victims of crime, and their families, in the first few hours after a tragedy. The Crisis Response Team will be called upon in cases of homicide, serious assault, accidental death, robbery, sexual assault, domestic disturbance and assistance with death notification, and to dispel tension when an incident occurs that may draw a large crowd. The team members are called to a crisis scene or to a local hospital by authorized police officers, either at the initiative of an officer at the scene, or at the request of the victim.

LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project and a Crisis Response Team work group member and team leader, is very involved in the project.

"The Sexual Minority Roundtable Crisis Response Team is different from our [LCP's] Anti-Violence Project in that hatred or bias does not have to be involved for this Crisis Response Team to be called," says Lewis. "We are there for all sexual minority victims of crimes and crisis, for the everyday tragedies all humans face. Traffic accidents don't pick sexual minority victims. They happen to everyone." She continues, "What's different for sexual minority victims is that we don't have many of the safeguards in place, such as marriage, that the majority does. For example, in a fatal traffic accident, how is the partner of a lesbian victim notified? How do the police know she exists or how to contact her?"

This brings to mind another important issue for Lewis. "This is a very good reason to come out and live openly as gays and lesbians. One never knows when he or she may be a victim. When you are incapacitated, you will not be able to let the police

know to contact your same-sex partner." Lewis advises, "Live openly so that the police and others will know who you are. Think about how you would want your lover to be treated in the event you were incapacitated, and take the necessary steps now to see that your wishes will be carried



(From left) Crisis Response Team volunteers William Warren, Elizabeth Allen, LaVerne Lewis, Reisa Morehouse and Roni Lang with the Police Bureau's sexual minority community liaison, Bruce Prunk

out." (See box for legal information about protecting your rights and those of your partner.)

The Crisis Response Team will provide victims and their families with information about victims' assistance programs and benefits; notify family, school or employers, when necessary; accompany the victim and/or the family to the hospital; arrange for emotional support from family, friends and neighbors; and assist with funeral arrangements.

Through life experience and training, the team will also be able to deal sensitively with some of

the special issues of sexual minority victims. For instance, emergency technicians may be unfamiliar with cross-dressers, transsexuals and others not in the mainstream. There will be members from each of those groups on the Crisis Response Team to ensure that all sexual minority victims and their families are treated with sensitivity and compassion. Team members will be able to facilitate communication between lovers and biological families of victims. Lewis notes that this assistance can be crucial when biological families do not know the sexual orientation of their relative or, if they do know, are uncomfortable with or disapprove of sexual minorities. Team members can advocate for visitation and decision-making rights on behalf of the lover of a victim. This is of special impor-

and a pager, which they are required to wear during their shifts. Volunteers commit to rotating shifts of no less than 24 hours.

Some volunteers have expressed concern about getting time off from work to respond to a crisis call. Says Lewis, "This is an opportunity to come out to your boss, or at least to express your support for the sexual minority community. Employers should be proud to have a well-trained crisis intervention specialist working for them. It is an honor to be paged by the police to respond to an emergency. It's very similar to the work of volunteer fire fighters, Red Cross disaster relief workers and National Guard personnel. Employers should grant employees time off for service on the Crisis Response Team as they do for any of these other important community services."

In addition to providing immediate assistance to sexual minority victims in crisis, Lewis sees the Crisis Response Team as a vital community service in other significant ways. "We are, in essence, second-class citizens. We lack many of the protec-

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tions that other victims have, such as the right to marry and share insurance benefits. The assistance the Crisis Response Team offers helps level it off." Lewis maintains that having a sexual minority Crisis Response Team will also serve to decrease the attacks of the radical right. "There is no way that victims' rights can be equated with 'special rights,'" says Lewis. "Having a victims' response team is something every victim needs."

According to Lewis, there are no reliable statistics on sexual minority victims of non-bias-related crimes and accidents. She sees an added benefit of the Crisis Response Team as providing those statistics. "Although I would prefer that no one suffer tragedy, it's important to know that sexual minorities also experience the same crimes and accidents as the majority community. It's another bridge to educate society about who we are."

Applications to volunteer for the Sexual Minority Roundtable Crisis Response Team can be obtained by contacting LaVerne Lewis at the Lesbian Community Project, 223-0071.

Protecting your assets

Portland attorney Jennifer Kimble suggests five practical steps that, when taken together, will increase the likelihood of your wishes being carried out in the event of your incapacity or death.

1. Carry an emergency identification card with you at all times. It should include any pertinent medical information such as chronic medical conditions and drug allergies and the name and phone numbers of the person(s) you want contacted in an emergency.

2. Prepare an advance directive. As the name suggests, an advance directive is a type of future planning for possible incapacity. It is a legal document that details your wishes about your medical care, including life support, and in which you

appoint the person you would prefer to make medical decisions for you if you become incapacitated. Kimble suggests that you also select an alternate appointee in case your first choice is unable to serve. For instance, you may have appointed your lover, but if you are in an accident together, he or she may also be incapacitated. Kimble notes that the advance directive forms available at Stevens-Ness Law Publishing Co. in Portland are adequate, inexpensive and easy to complete. Kimble advises that your signature on the form must be witnessed.

3. Select a guardian and conservator. This procedure is best carried out through an attorney, according to Kimble. A guardian makes decisions in all areas of an incapacitated person's life, except for financial matters. Some examples include questions of daily care, medical treatment, visitation, and where and with whom the incapacitated person will live. A conservator makes financial decisions, including investments and spending, for the disabled person. You may choose the same person or a different person for each.

4. Decide on your beneficiaries and have your

partner's name entered on titles of property with rights of survivorship. Kimble suggests that you name your partner, or other person, as the beneficiary of your life insurance, retirement and other such benefits. Kimble recommends that some couples may want to place the names of both partners on titles to vehicles and real and other properties, especially those with rights of survivorship. This will commingle your assets, and Kimble cautions that it is much more difficult to break ties with another once you have done this. However, Kimble states, for life partners and others who are absolutely certain of their desire to share assets with one another, this will allow your partner to have full use of those assets if you are incapacitated, and those assets would transfer to your partner if you were to die.

5. Make out a will. According to Kimble, a will not only controls disbursement of your assets when you die, but also allows you to designate the guardian of your minor child or children. This designation will not override the rights of the other biological or adoptive parent, if one exists, says Kimble. But it does allow you to decide who will

care for your child or children in the absence of a second legal parent, if you die.

Kimble states that without these protections in place, the right to make decisions for you and to inherit your property passes in descending order of preference from your legal spouse (read not your lover or partner) to your children, your parents, your siblings and, finally, to the state.

Kimble stresses that these suggestions are in no way meant to be a substitute for comprehensive legal advice, and she urges readers to contact an attorney for a thorough consultation about future and estate planning.

For more information about establishing legal rights for same-sex and unmarried couples, or future and estate planning, consult attorneys who advertise in *Just Out* or call the Lawyer Referral Service at 684-3763 and ask to be referred to a lawyer who practices domestic relations, wills and probate for same-sex and unmarried couples.

With some modifications, the above-listed considerations and suggestions also apply to gay men and lesbians without partners.