



South Mobile students still suffering from oil spill (video)

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Project Rebound counselor Tonya Fistein (far left), counselor Tammy House (center) and Therapist Che'Quita Chaney talk to students at Grand Bay Middle School. (Press-Register/Bill Starling)

BAYOU LA BATRE, Alabama -- For the children of south Mobile County, the effects of **2010's Deepwater Horizon oil spill** didn't wash away as shorelines were cleared of tarballs and as waters reopened to fishing.

Their pains are still evident every day at school.

A number of children and teens whose parents lost their jobs are living in houses with no electricity or running water, so

they're coming to class in dirty uniforms, according to counselors. Some are washing their clothes and taking showers at school, hoping their classmates don't notice.

Also, counselors said, there are families that can no longer afford their children's medication for attention deficit disorder or other ailments, so the kids are acting out in class, and getting into fights.

Counselors said they are working with three emotionally scarred girls who were prostituted out by family members to get money.

Some teenagers regularly miss school to stay home and take care of younger siblings while their parents are trying to hold on to jobs or looking for work.

And as domestic violence and substance abuse have escalated in the battered community, the counselors describe students who have come to school with wounded self-esteem, or even smelling of methamphetamine being cooked in their homes.

According to a study by the University of South Alabama last spring, 35 percent of the students at Bryant High School in Irvington reported being significantly and personally traumatized by the oil spill. A third of them said they were very concerned because the spill had caused their parents to lose jobs.

The number of students getting in trouble at Alba Middle School in Bayou La Batre had doubled in a year, according to the study, and was up by 20 percent at Bryant.

"There are tons of stories," said Paige Rucker, state director of Project Rebound, which, in tandem with AltaPointe Health Systems, has 21 counselors on a recovery team concentrating on south Mobile County. "You take a community that was already suffering, with Hurricane Katrina and the economy, and you layer the oil spill on top of it."

With that "trifecta," she said, the community is more than hurting. "It's on life support."

Bryant Principal Doug Estle said parents who lost shrimping or seafood processing jobs because of the spill got claims money from BP that helped them through the first eight or nine months. Now, the money has run out, he said.

Project Rebound

Counselors with Project rebound help south Mobile County students cope with the lasting effects of the oil spill.

"What I've seen since the BP oil spill is that things have steadily gotten worse," said Estle, adding that he hopes that the situation has hit the bottom and will soon improve.

A local church has been sending food home with students in backpacks at night and on the weekends. But the supply of food at pantries has depleted. And a program to help spill-affected families pay utility bills is no longer available.

Although counselors said that community members are traditionally reluctant to ask for help with their mental health, many are starting to open up.

Project Rebound is working in Mobile and Baldwin counties funded by \$12 million from BP PLC, which owned the Deepwater Horizon well that spewed millions of gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico in 2010.

Three counselors on an education team are assisting nine south Mobile County schools — one high school, two middle schools and six elementaries. Altogether, those schools enroll 5,700 students.

They give class lectures on self-esteem, bullying and other topics. They work with some students in small-group counseling sessions, perform grief counseling and refer those with the most severe problems to therapy or to a psychiatrist through AltaPointe.

"We don't want them dropping out," said crisis counselor Tammy House, who is from Bayou La Batre. "We want them to be inspired."

One recent day at Grand Bay Middle School, House, crisis counselor Tonya Fistein and therapist Che'Quita Chaney, who comprise the education team, led several class discussions.

"How many of you have good self-esteem?" Fistein asked a class of 20 eighth-graders.

Seven students raised their hands.

"How does that affect you if you come into your classroom and see the word 'test' written on the board?" Fistein asked.

"You get scared," a student answered.

"You might fail," another replied.

No matter what is going on at home, the counselors said, students need to learn to feel good about themselves, so they can finish their homework, make it to the next grade level and graduate.

They need to treat classmates kindly, the counselors said, because they don't know what might be going on in others' lives.

"If we boost their self-esteem," Fistein said, "we boost their resiliency."

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