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## Project Rebound counseling to end

### People's psychological scars from tornado heal, lessening need for crisis counselors

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TUSCALOOSA | Counselors with Project

Rebound, a crisis counseling service that has been helping victims of the April 27, 2011, tornado, will end their work in the Tuscaloosa area on Friday.

Executive Director Lisa Turley said Project Rebound is the state's crisis counseling program funded through a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The FEMA grants are given to states hit by a disaster that strains their resources. The grant is administered through the Alabama Department of Mental Health.

Project Rebound was awarded \$5 million to work in the Tuscaloosa area, but only about \$3 million of the grant was used, Turley said. The rest of the money will be returned to FEMA. Most of the \$3 million was used for counselors' salaries and travel reimbursements.

The counselors are local residents who were trained to do crisis counseling to help people affected by the tornado.

Turley said the program is being ended in West Alabama because the majority of people in the area no longer need crisis counseling for the tornado.

"Here in Alabama, we had the ability, if need be, to apply for an extension of time, but the citizens of Alabama are very resilient and they were very accepting of what we offered," Turley said.

"In the case of Hurricane Katrina, we had crisis programs that were operating for 12 months, 24 months and 36 months in different places."

Clay Leak, the Project Rebound team leader for Tuscaloosa, said the work that the roughly 30 crisis counselors have done in the Tuscaloosa area in the past 13 months has been emotionally draining, but he said he is proud that they were able to help so many people.

"Some of the greatest challenges we faced (were) just going out there every day and doing the (counseling)," he said. "It's emotionally taxing.

"Everyone remembers the tornado. People in Tuscaloosa can't help but remember it, but we've lived and breathed the tornado every single day in listening to people's stories about it and how it's affected them.

"The emotional strain it imposes from hearing about it all the time and reliving it through their stories is hard. But it's been rewarding and personally therapeutic to me to be part of the rebuilding in this way."

Leak said the counselors went to schools, churches, community programs and door-to-door providing crisis counseling to people and teaching them disaster preparedness.

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"Crisis counseling is mostly just supporting people," Leak said. "We're not trying to diagnose you. We're here just to listen and be there for you.

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"We've met people consistently that after many months of thinking that they're fine, the loss and grief just hits them. Different people have different time lines for their grief.

"We wanted to be here a whole year considering the impact and the devastation of the tornado. There are still people out there trying to get things back together."

Leak said for the first several months, the group counseled between 150 and 300 people monthly. The number then dropped to between 50 and 75 people each month.

In April 2012, the one-year anniversary of the tornado, the number more than doubled to about 250 people.

"The anniversary was more emotional than I was expecting," Leak said. "That day was truly a reflection of the bad things. We tried to position ourselves anywhere there was a tornado survivor."

Turley said the Project Rebound team in West Alabama counseled a total of 104,512 people, far exceeding the 70,000 people that FEMA expected them to serve.

Of that number, children made up 84,000 of those counseled, she said.

"The kids generally liked to talk about it more than the adults," Leak said. "Apparently, a lot of trampolines were destroyed in the tornado, according to all the kids."

Turley said she's proud of the work that the crisis counselors have done. She said the team stepped away from their normal lives for a year and went out every day to help people who lost their homes and loved ones.

"That's hard to do, being someone's sounding board every day," she said. "These people just came to us and said they wanted to help.

"Their skill set wasn't building things, or preparing mass meals, it was their big, incredible hearts. These people signed on for a year and said they'll worry about what they'll do for income the next year when it comes. They put their life on hold to help others."

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