

Running head: UNDER THE YELLOW TAPE

SIDE BAR

Under the Yellow Tape: Working within the

Medical, Legal, and Judicial Systems

by

John Charles Thomas, Ph.D., Ph.D.  
Chair, Center for Counseling and Family Studies  
Liberty University  
1971 University Blvd.  
Lynchburg, VA 24502  
jctomas2@liberty.edu  
434-592-4047

WORD COUNT: 521

## **Under the Yellow Tape: Working within the Medical, Legal, and Judicial Systems**

The types of problems addressed in an office differ dramatically from those that happen in the context of violent crimes, horrific accidents, and hostage scenes. The first contact with victims might be in homes, streets, emergency rooms, shelters, jails, and law enforcement offices. Arriving at a scene that is marked by yellow tape is daunting. Counselors must develop a frame of mind that allows them to get into the trenches. Additionally, they must work collaboratively with other crisis response systems to ensure that victims receive timely holistic care. Following are some principles to guide counselors in working with multiple systems.

- ◆ **Know your community services and local health agency resources.** Your local health agency is likely to be the group that can be counted on to work closely with fire, police, and hospitals. In metropolitan areas, an Office of Emergency Management may serve this function.
- ◆ **Know local laws that pertain to domestic violence, rape, and commitment.**
- ◆ **Make partnerships (medical, law enforcement, first responders, etc) and establish a secure communication link with these systems before a crisis occurs.**  
Working collaboratively with these systems can be a delicate dance that requires substantial interpersonal skill.
- ◆ **Show initiative.** Police are commonly called upon to deal with the mentally ill, yet lack appropriate training. Volunteer to provide training for officers dealing with this population.

- ◆ **Instead of putting yourself as “the expert”, assume a humble attitude.** Be respectful of the emergency response systems. As they become more familiar with you and your services they may establish alliances with you and trust your expertise.
- ◆ **Learn how to navigate around a crime scene.** It is not wise to go into an emergency situation alone; even police request back-up to assist with any unforeseeable circumstances.
- ◆ **Be sensitive to the needs of others.** Remember, that first responders and other mental health workers may require your services as well as the victims.

The experience of Rogers and Soyka (2004) illustrates these concepts against the backdrop of September 11, 2001. The psychologist and doctoral student volunteered as counselors but were repeatedly impeded by their professional organizations and the American Red Cross (ARC) on the argument that they had been overrun with volunteers. Undeterred, they drove to New York City at their own expense and secured clearances as local mental health workers through a chapter of the ARC. Dispatched to Ground Zero they provided services to rescue workers and volunteers for two weeks. Two tools assisted them under the yellow tape. First, they distributed privately purchased “angel” pins shaped like firemen and police officers, which enabled them to initiate conversations with individuals who might otherwise have been inaccessible. Second, they used two therapy dogs which were trained to respond to intense human emotional reactions. The dogs also opened doors to interact with rescue workers.

Because of their willingness and determination to help, Rogers and Soyka became part of a brotherhood of compassion that emerged within the security perimeter of the World Trade

Center site. Likewise, being willing to go under the yellow tape allows counselors to apply their knowledge and skill when and where it is needed most.

#### Reference

Rogers, J. R., & Soyka, K. M., (2004). Grace and compassion at ground zero. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*. 25(1), 27-29.

## About the Author

John C. Thomas is the Chair and Ph.D. Program Director in the Center of Counseling and Family Studies at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Prior to joining the faculty at Liberty, Dr. Thomas was an internal EAP consultant with DuPont for over 12 years. In addition, he owns and operates Source One Strategies (SOS), an organizational consulting business. Dr. Thomas holds a Ph.D. in Counseling and a Graduate Certificate in Alcohol and Drug Studies from the University of South Carolina, a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from Capella University, a MA and a BS from Liberty University. Dr. Thomas is coauthor of a book on suffering to be released by Tyndale in the Fall of 2008. He and his wife of 23 years conduct marriage enrichment retreats; they have two children Katie (21 years old) and Stephen (16 years old).