

‘Be vigilant’: Counselling encouraged for Fort Smith residents after fatal crash

BILL GRAVELAND

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A pedestrian walks along the main street in Fort Smith, N.W.T., on Jan. 26, 2024.

JASON FRANSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The deadly plane crash that rocked residents of a small town in the Northwest Territories has left no part of the community unscathed, including local schools.

Flags flew at half-mast Saturday at Joseph B. Tyrrell Elementary School in Fort Smith in memory of the six people killed when their charter plane crashed shortly after takeoff on Tuesday.

The aircraft had just taken off from Fort Smith and was en route to the Diavik Diamond Mine when it hit the ground and caught fire. Photos released by the Transportation Safety Board show a rubble-strewn crash site, with the plane's tattered fuselage lying in a heavily wooded area just west of town.

Local education authorities – aware the crash was just the latest in a string of potentially upsetting events in recent months – has since taken steps to provide additional support for the town's children and teens.

The South Slave Divisional Education Council took immediate action to provide emotional support for students once news of the accident became public.

“In the end we basically had the same concerns about our students, our teachers, our administrators, our community, our family. It definitely affects everybody,” School Superintendent Souhail Soujah told The Canadian Press.

“We've asked our teachers to be vigilant for any student that wanted to speak about it or actually wanted to have a conversation about it, because information and the news made its way through the community fairly quickly.”

Fort Smith has two schools: the elementary school serving about 280 students and the Paul Kaeser High School with about 240 students between grades 7 and 12.

Soujah said the specific conversations varied by age group, with students in older grades often going into greater depth. He said younger kids were given support and encouraged to have discussions with their parents.

“Each person deals with tragedy and grief in a different way and we wanted to make sure we were respectful of the role that parents wish to play in these types of conversations,” he said, noting additional counsellors have been brought in over the past week.

“With the older students, we asked our teachers and administrators to be mindful of any behaviour that may lead them to speculate or to assume or believe the student needed help or support.”

The town of 2,200 has had a rough few months, starting during the summer when residents were forced to evacuate due to wildfires burning less than four kilometres from the community.

“The evacuation with the fires, the air accident, we've also had a recent youth in our community that committed suicide, so we do have quite a number of traumatic events impacting us,” Soujah said.

“My fear is that with continued tragedy after tragedy, we've come to normalize crisis and this is where the support is needed in a matter that is positive and forward thinking.”

Fort Smith Mayor Fred Daniels is encouraging members of the public to seek counselling if they are having trouble dealing with the tragedy. He said he was unable to speak at a vigil Wednesday night after he broke down crying when his emotions got the best of him.

“To those that it’s affecting, go and see counselling. Don’t pack it around with you. Get rid of it and deal with it. It’s okay to show that you’re caring, that you love other people,” Daniels said.

“This is the first time Fort Smith has been through something like this in its history. We’ve been through a lot in the last three years, fires and deaths and now this. We just have got to pull together.”

The office of territorial Premier R.J. Simpson said he will visit Fort Smith on Sunday to show his support for the community, as well as friends and relatives of those who died.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-be-vigilant-counselling-encouraged-for-fort-smith-residents-after/>

I am an old counsellor/crisis intervention specialist who has done more than his share of “trauma response.” I am dismayed by the “therapy culture” we are now locked in. My continual concern as an intervenor, after identifying need and risk, engaging such, was to not become part of the problem myself, feeding distress and de facto promoting “traumatization” as a “normal” outcome to any measure or pretense of ‘trauma.’ But now the “talk therapy” industry is training us all to turn to them “when bad things happen” with our leaders obliged to institutionalize this. Counselling is sold now as a technique that can be delivered by anyone practiced in the process, as though just talking to someone, however “outside” and unremarkable they may be, and facile what they proffer, practiced in bouncing back “empathy” and “understanding,” is therapeutic in itself. “Wisdom” is never considered a prerequisite—usually because the counsellor has precious little of it her-/him-self. I know too many good, solid, nevertheless sensitive people—not “clients”—for whom this would never work, and should not. When I see leaders” chiming in so “knowledgeably,” I am nonplussed; they are being political, playing the game given them, but they become part of the problem more than the solution. They don’t really know what they are talking about, or have the credibility and “purchase” in these arenas they would have us believe they do, but they use their stages to claim a role serving their personal agendas, however well-intentioned, all straining to fill a “public service” role defined poorly. Good thing I am not in the business anymore!