



Mental Health

Counseling and your security clearance

By the Bureau of Diplomatic Security

After a magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck Haiti in January, just as night fell, agents of the Bureau of Diplomatic Security from the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince went out into the darkened city to locate missing embassy staff members.

What they encountered can be best described as hell on earth. The walking wounded emerged as shadows out of the dust, begging for help, while sounds of pain, anguish and prayer filled the air.

Diplomatic Security Service Director Jeffrey Culver traveled to Haiti on Feb. 8 to monitor the emergency-response effort. He gathered the dozens of agents who had volunteered for the mission and thanked them. Then he said, "You saw things that you never want to see again. Don't underestimate that you need to talk to people about your experiences. Don't keep all this inside of you. If you need to talk with somebody, let us know."

DS special agents are not the only ones experiencing traumatic environments. Director General of the Foreign Service and Director of Human Resources Nancy J. Powell said, "We recognize that Department employees serving in combat zones are exposed to stress levels comparable, at times, to those experienced by military personnel. We need to continue thinking about how to assist employees with post-traumatic stress disorder."



Diplomatic Security Service Director Jeffrey Culver, standing at center, meets with DSS agents involved in the Haiti earthquake-response effort in Santo Domingo, advising them to take advantage of mental health counseling available at the Office of Medical Services.

To that end, the Office of Medical Services has developed programs where employees can talk about their experiences at high threat/high stress posts such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan.

Still, an urban legend regarding mental-health treatment and its impact on security clearances continues to pervade the halls of the State Department. Although senior Department leaders clearly encourage employees to seek help when needed, a recent Office of the Inspector General report titled "Review of Support for Employees Who Are Serving or Have Served in

High Stress, High Threat, Unaccompanied Posts" said that employees believe there is a "significant stigma attached to seeking mental health assistance."

When being investigated for an initial security clearance, or re-investigated for continued access, individuals complete an Electronic Questionnaire for Investigations Processing. Question 21 focuses on mental health. It states:

In the last seven years, have you consulted with a health-care professional regarding an emotional- or mental-health condition, or were you hospitalized for such a condition? Answer "No" if the counseling was for any of the following reasons and was not court ordered:

- 1) strictly marital, family or grief not related to violence by you; or
- 2) strictly related to adjustments from service in a military combat environment.

So, if a person were going through a divorce or family crisis and sought counseling, he or she would answer "No" to question 21. If a Foreign Service officer developed PTSD after time served in a military combat environment, he or she would answer "No" to question 21.

During the subject interview, the background investigator will ask certain mental-health questions to best place in context the employee's answer to question 21.

DS works closely with MED so that any evaluation of the impact of mental-health counseling on eligibility for a security clearance is made by MED. The details of that assessment are retained by MED and never shared with DS.

Of the 517 cases concerning mental-health issues that DS referred to MED in 2009, not one resulted in the denial or revocation of a security clearance for mental-health reasons.

Also, if DS concludes that a security clearance needs to be revoked based wholly or in part on mental-health issues, that decision is eventually reviewed by the Under Secretary for Management plus two (non-DS) senior officers.

While the urban legend exists, the fact is that simply seeking mental-health counseling has never solely

resulted in the revocation or denial of a clearance. The government-wide Adjudicative Guidelines are clear that seeking mental-health counseling is to be viewed in a positive light when rendering a clearance determination. DS views seeking mental-health assistance as a positive step and a normal part of a person's overall health and wellness.

DS stands by to answer any question employees may have about this or any other personnel-security issue and can be reached at 1-866-643-4636 or by e-mail at securityclearance@state.gov. ■