

## **A Psychiatric Response to Disaster— The Beverly Hills Club Fire: A Preliminary Report**

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It is not known at this writing how the fire at the Beverly Hills Club in Kentucky started. An investigators' report said that the wiring in the club was "an electrician's nightmare" and that the fire burned within the walls for at least half an hour before erupting in smoke and flames. For 20 minutes club personnel tried to extinguish it themselves. The first warning was thought by most of those watching the entertainment in the cabaret section to be a part of a comedy act. Such are the power and trust in our environment, often resulting in tragic denial.

There were no homes lost, no roads or bridges destroyed, no telephone lines torn, no businesses put out of operation except for the supper club itself, none of the usual effects which cause a President to bring in the U.S. Army engineers and other support teams such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and its mobile homes. There were 164 deaths and 60 injuries, the latter mostly from smoke inhalation. Aside from the tragedy of 164 dead, the most extensive and longstanding damage of the Beverly Hills fire is psychological.

A journalist, looking back on what Beverly Hills was before the fire, said, "It was a Land of Oz." It was a complex structure of bars, dining rooms, cabaret rooms, all opulently decorated, catering to special dinners, wedding parties, retirement parties, and bar mitzvahs. Advertising regularly appeared in newspapers far from Cincinnati, promoting the popular singers and comedians who played to Las Vegas-like crowds in the largest room in the club. On the night of the fire, a party decided to leave early and noticed the walls were hot. They were in the Zebra Room where the fire was contained and unseen before it finally broke into the banquet and dining rooms with flashes of fire and smoke. It was 9:00 p.m.; soon, the community would be aware of the major disaster.

Police and fire departments responded within minutes, the local hospitals, coroner's office, Red Cross, Salvation Army, police-crisis staff, and clergy within hours. Television and radio stations announced needs for special types of assistance. The sight of the blaze attracted people from miles around, resulting in a convergence of volunteers at the blaze,