

## Milwaukee company played key role in 9/11 response

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A small Milwaukee company played a big role in the crisis communications following the 9/11 terrorist attacks 10 years ago.

FEI Behavioral Health, 11700 W. Lake Park Drive in Milwaukee, was founded in 1979 to handle crisis communications and employee assistance programs for other companies. Most of FEI's 35 employees have at least a master's level degree in a behavioral health field, said Vivian Marinelli, senior director of crisis management services.

"They're all mental health professionals, so they already know how to work with people in crisis," Marinelli said.

Just six months before the Sept. 11 attacks, FEI had landed a contract with the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. The company would be responsible for handling the agency's crisis communications in the case of terrorist activities and mass casualty events.

In addition, FEI had an existing contract with Marriott International, which had a hotel at the base of the Twin Towers that was destroyed.

When they heard the news that two planes had hit the World Trade Center in New York that morning, FEI employees reacted just like everyone else, Marinelli said.

"Shock, trying to figure out what was happening and then realizing we had to go into action," she said.

On the same day, FEI was activated for two clients in response to the event.

From Sept. 11 to Dec. 31, 2001, FEI fielded more than 89,000 phone calls and more than 105,000 website inquiries from victims, friends and family members affected by 9/11. Call center employees counseled and provided referrals to callers so they could receive additional assistance.

FEI's existing staff could not handle such a huge event all on their own, so the company temporarily added about 60 call center and support staff in-house, Marinelli said. The firm also worked with a local utility's call center to get the help of another 83 call center specialists, who assisted with getting information and passing it on to counselors.

While it scaled back to its usual staff size in October 2001, FEI continued to offer 24-hour counseling service through the end of 2002.

"Even in the next year, we continued to take a lot of calls because people were still dealing with the aftermath," Marinelli said.

Even today, the 9/11 line remains open and the company takes about four calls per month from victims, friends and family members who are still dealing with the physical and psychological impact of the events, she said.

"Obviously we were pushed to our limit," Marinelli said. "We had been tested to a degree, but not to anything that we saw with 9/11."

Since proving it could handle such an arduous crisis communications task, FEI has received three more government contracts and contracts with several other hotels, corporations and airlines.

Employees also learned about handling communications on a massive scale, and the company is stronger because of it, she said.

***Molly Newman is a reporter at BizTimes Media LLC.***

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