

April 24, 2009 ♦ Vol. 34, No. 17 ♦ Madison, WI ♦ [TheDailyPage.com](http://TheDailyPage.com)

# STHEMUS



# Businesses get religion on stress

*Chaplaincy program helps employees cope*

By Lynn Welch

Janelle Skillrud drifted from faith as an adult, as many people do. Then, about three years ago while working in sales at Pellitteri Waste Systems in Madison, she received a benefit that helped her find it again.

"I was going through a divorce, and it was hard," says Skillrud, 52. "I just started chatting with Steve on those visits when he would be at Pellitteri."

Skillrud is referring to Steve Cook, who heads the Capital Chaplains program.

In 2006, Pellitteri became the first company in this region to offer its nearly 50 employees a chaplain assistance program. The program, offered through Capital Chaplains, is available for employees and their families who wish to discuss personal matters in a confidential forum. The chaplain visits the workplace once a week to offer a nonjudgmental, nondominational ear.

For Skillrud, this benefit was a godsend. She says it helped her whole family.

"I tried to surround myself with very strong, very healthy people at that time," Skillrud explains. "He was right there, with listening ears and good, healthy suggestions. Because when you're going through a divorce or anything difficult, there's no manual that tells you how to do it."

Cook began his for-profit business in Middleton in 2006. He and his staff — he contracts with five other chaplains, including one fluent in Spanish — now minister to employees of seven local companies. They are: Pellitteri Waste Systems, the Engelhart Center, A&J Specialty Services Inc., Dane Manufacturing, Ganser Company, Coyle Carpet One and Midwest Patrol & Investigative.

Tom Pellitteri, the owner of Pellitteri Waste, says he decided to offer employees

the chaplaincy program as part of the company's wellness initiative.

"We're a family business, and this was a family decision to provide this benefit," he says. "Our family has a strong belief in providing employees with the means and benefits to provide for and grow their families. This is basic to our Christian belief."

**The National Institute of Business and Industrial Chaplains** puts the number of workplace chaplains in U.S. companies at 4,000 and rising.

Cook says these services are in growing demand because corporate leaders are increasingly aware of the sorts of pressure their workers are under. Even as companies seek ways to scale back expenses, some business leaders are willing to invest in this service, believing that workers become more effective if they have an outlet for stress.

Capital Chaplains charges between \$15 and \$25 per employee per month. Contracts run six months to a year, typically, as businesses try out the service.

The program is rooted in the military or hospital chaplain model that provides a neutral, nurturing, available caregiver focused on helping employees and families better manage and respond to basic personal life and work issues.

Chaplain assistance programs are similar to employee assistance programs, a standard benefit in many firms. EAPs, as they're called, offer employees access to a helpline and counseling services.

But Cook says chaplain assistance gives companies a bigger bang for their buck, with between 60% and 70% of workers participating versus 14% in traditional EAPs.

"It's relationship based," says Cook, explaining that a company's workers have

some routine contact with him and know of his availability in times of need. "They invite me in because we have a prior relationship."

Cook says the changing nature of work has also made chaplaincy a good benefit. Many people spend more time than ever at their place of employment and in the company of coworkers. This has become where they find community, rather than at a church or other faith community.

Chaplaincy programs don't just deal with crisis situations. They can be used for all kinds of support.

Brady Wolf, 24, a parts associate with the Engelhart Center, and his fiancée, Stephanie Jones, meet weekly with Cook at the Middleton Public Library as they prepare to get married this summer. Cook offers premarriage ministry using the book *Empowering Couples* by David and Amy Olson. And he plans to marry the couple, who have an 8-month-old daughter.

Wolf felt the chaplaincy benefit made sense because he and Jones, 21, come from different church backgrounds.

"We thought it was a really good idea to know what we were getting into," he says. "This is a neutral ground for you and your loved one to get together if someone has something to say. It's almost like a therapy session; he's there as an open mediator."

**Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the** Madison-based Freedom From Religion Foundation, says her group hears often from employees who feel pressured by employers to engage in religious activities, like a prayer



**Steve Cook:** 'It's relationship based.'

group before their shift. She says that while it's a private business issue to offer a chaplain service, there is now a section in the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission dealing with religious harassment in the workplace.

At best, a chaplaincy program is touchy, says Gaylor: "I wonder how people would feel if a business were to hire someone and say 'This is our atheist therapist.' I don't think people would be comfortable."

Cook stresses that the program is voluntary and not based on an organized religious program. The company's website ([capchaps.org](http://capchaps.org)) expounds on this: "Because it is not an organized religious program, nothing is done that violates religious discrimination, civil rights or privacy laws."

Janelle Skillrud has no complaints. Cook met with her and her former husband, Dick Skillrud, as the couple were ending their 28-year marriage; they remained good friends afterward. Cook continued to spend time with the Skillruds and their three daughters, even as Dick became seriously ill.

"We would go to church with Steve and his wife, and even though Dick and I were divorced, we both grew in faith, which is wonderful," Skillrud says. "He helped our entire family, and, in my situation, it gave me my faith in God back."

Last summer, when Dick Skillrud died, Cook helped the family through the grief. He also officiated at Dick's funeral. Says Skillrud, "I can't tell you what a sense of tranquility and peace it left me and my daughters to know that Dick is in heaven." ♦