A Buddhist disaster relief organization offers key support after Monterey Park shooting

by Alejandra Molina

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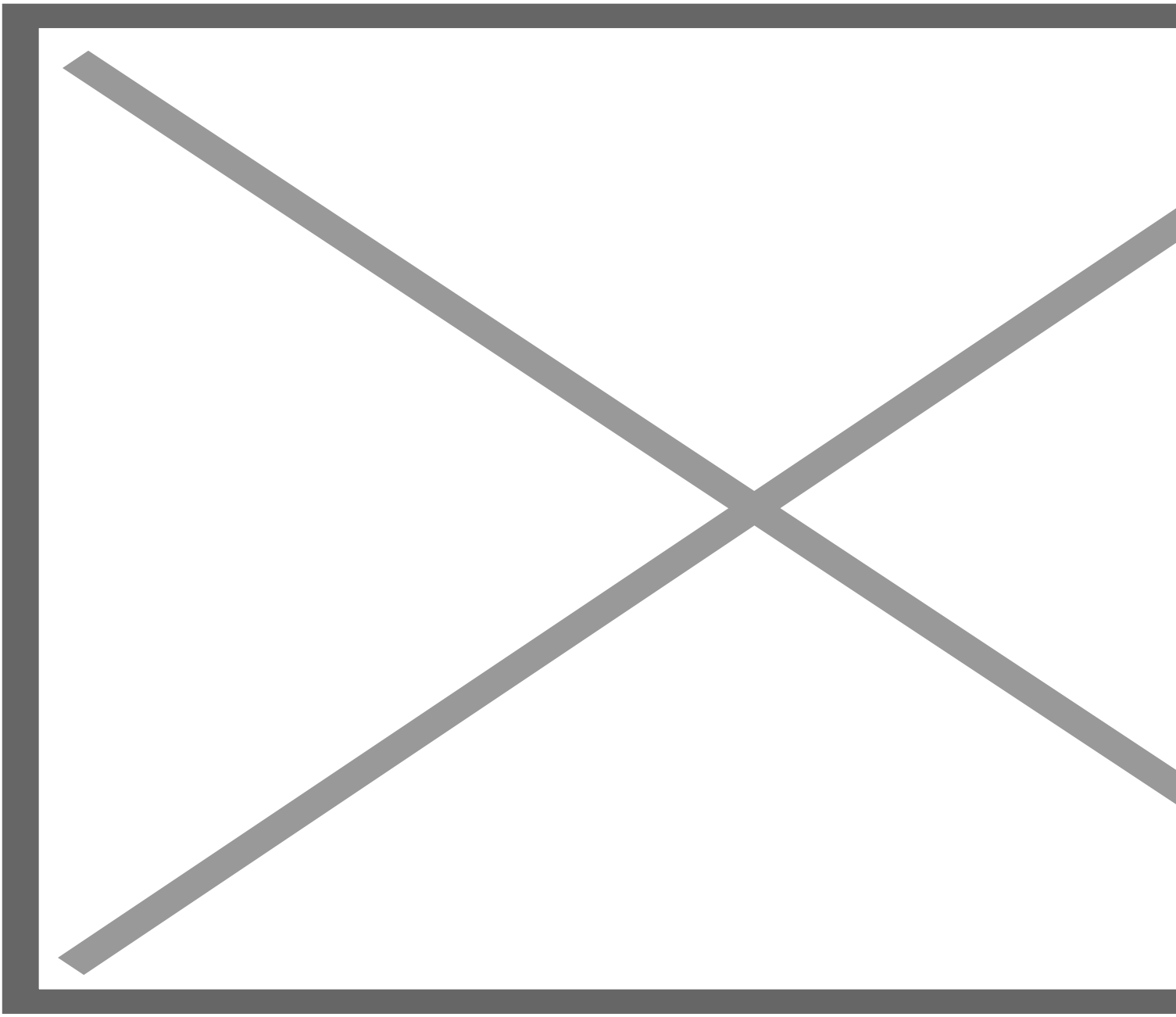

Kenny Loo prays outside Star Ballroom Dance Studio on January 23 for the victims killed two days before in a shooting. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, a global humanitarian organization, has mobilized relief efforts in a range of emergency and disaster events, including the 2000 Singapore Airlines crash that killed more than 80 people and the 2005 Glendale train crash that left 11 people dead.

But it had never, until now, responded to the scene of a mass shooting.

That changed when 72-year-old Huu Can Tran opened fire and killed 11 people—all in their 50s, 60s, and 70s—at Star Ballroom Dance Studio in Monterey Park, a city in Los Angeles County's San Gabriel Valley regarded as America's first "suburban Chinatown." Residents in the area were gearing up for the beginning of Lunar New Year festivities.

Just hours after the Saturday night shooting, Tzu Chi volunteers received a text message from the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Los Angeles, alerting them that some of the victims were Taiwanese Americans. They also got word that state officials were in need of translation services at a senior facility turned crisis response center.

By early Sunday morning, Tzu Chi had deployed a group of volunteers to the center to relay information in Mandarin and Cantonese to victims' families. Their assistance was also sought by the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office to translate personal information, understand families' needs, and link them to government resources. Volunteers are helping facilitate the travel of victims' relatives from Taiwan to Los Angeles.

As they continue to hear the stories of those impacted, Debra Boudreaux, the foundation's chief executive officer, said it's important to lend a listening ear and "let them release their anxiety and encourage them to speak out rather than holding in their feelings."

Founded in Taiwan by Buddhist nun Cheng Yen, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation was established in 1966. Its USA headquarters, established about 20 years later, is in the San Gabriel Valley. There are currently 65 Tzu Chi offices across the US.

As of Friday, volunteers remained at the crisis response center.

Tzu Chi volunteers are also helping families of the deceased make funeral arrangements, including those who may need to connect to a Buddhist temple, monk, or nun who can provide Buddhist chanting and other services for a funeral and during the mourning period, which can last 49 days.

Boudreaux said they're planning to hold an interfaith prayer on February 5—in conjunction with the Chinese New Year—as a way to offer "peer support and spiritual care" for the affected families.

Since the shooting, a number of vigils have been held in Monterey Park, with religious leaders, city officials, activists, and residents coming together for comfort and to memorialize the victims.

Chang Ju of Dharma Drum Mountain Los Angeles participated in a vigil on Wednesday and acknowledged that "grief is unavoidable" for those who have lost loved ones. She led participants in a Buddhist prayer and paid homage to Buddhists "that were of great compassion."

"Now that the tragedy has happened and cannot be undone we must turn . . . to the power of compassion, condolences, and encouragement," she said.

The Monterey Park shooting was one of two shootings in three days in California.

Just two days after the mass shooting in Monterey Park, 66-year-old Chunli Zhao is killed seven people in a shooting rampage at a farm and nursery in Half Moon Bay in Northern California.

Also on people's minds is the May 2022 shooting at the Geneva Presbyterian Church in South Orange County's Laguna Woods, where David Wenwei Chou, 68, is accused of shooting six people inside the Taiwanese church. One person died.

Many are wondering what would cause older Asian men to cause this kind of harm.

Since the Laguna Woods shooting, Boudreaux said Tzu Chi volunteers have been working on outreach toward the aging Asian population. Volunteers with their foundation, which has been in the United States for more than 30 years, are also aging, she said.

Boudreaux said they've been seeking to make the lives of Asian elders in the San Gabriel Valley area "more meaningful," by seeking to provide "more mindfulness" and helping them have a more "clear direction."

"They are facing a lot of loneliness," Boudreaux said.

Tzu Chi has been working with a Monterey Park retirement home to provide programming dealing with climate change and environmental wellness. In one program, the elders teach younger people how to sew so they don't throw away clothes that simply need repair. They do indoor and outdoor gardening as well as take part in recycling programs.

"Since the Taiwanese Presbyterian church incident happened, we realized this situation is going to get more and more challenging. How we are going to bring the elders out to the community will be the key focus," Boudreaux said.

Added Boudreaux: "As a community faith-based organization, as a community-based organization, as immigrant organizations, how are we going to provide a platform, a space, a program to bring everybody together?

"This will give them a space for safety, conversation and dialogue." —Religion News Service