

# Crisis management part II: disaster human services

There are no right or wrong answers when dealing with people who have lost their loved ones, writes **Robert Jensen**, only wrong ways of doing things

**T**HE GOAL OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT is to resolve an abnormal situation quickly and to restore order and balance so that people can return to their routines. When change occurs, we adjust and strive for a new balance, a new consistency, and often family, friends and colleagues are a vital part of that process.

But what happens when the crisis also involves serious injury and loss of life to those who we depend upon to help us restore that balance?

Best practice and many laws dictate that business and governments commit resources to help those directly affected by crisis transition from the immediate event to that new routine – ie disaster human services.

During a mass casualty or fatality incident, the best result that crisis management can achieve is to not make the situation worse; we cannot undo the event. The obvious impact of ignoring this and treating these events as routine is the emotional toll on the people involved – those whose family members or friends have been injured or killed.

Less obvious, but just as damaging, is the impact on the responding staff, or employees of private businesses such as airlines, cruise operators or government leaders. They may be left with feelings of guilt, and might have been privately and publicly criticised for the way in which they responded. I doubt any business or government leader fully understands or appreciates how it feels when several hundred angry family members tell a person that they have killed their loved ones and now do not care. It is not something most are prepared for, nor ever really recover from.

There is also the practical aspect to consider: at some point there will be a process to determine what financial amount will replace the income provided by those lost or no longer able to work. In cases involving commercial transportation or government negligence, a settlement may be reached based on the estimated financial loss a family has suffered. However, in some cases it can take years to reach that point because of the need to 'punish'



*As part of a burial of a victim, recovered ten years after the loss, Frank Ciaccio (Kenyon Executive) hands flowers to family members who have come to pay their respects and say goodbye*

those involved. Likely events in the process will include repeated news stories focusing on the 'lack of care' aspect. The manner in which the system responds is becoming an area of focus both in litigation and legislation.

Lessons learned from aviation and natural disasters, as well as terror attacks, highlight some key principles, the most important being to tell the truth. This does not mean volunteering information not asked for nor wanted, but providing factual and straightforward answers when requested. The shock of being told that someone close to you is missing and presumed dead is overwhelming and can result in specific physical reactions; it does not, however, make people less intelligent. There is often a sense of needing to protect people from information but this never works. The anger when the truth is discovered is much worse than the shock of receiving the information.

Secondly, communicate the facts to those involved before releasing information to the media. Few things irritate people more, nor have a longer lasting effect, than learning about the death or injury of a family member

or friend through the media. This point was discussed in the previous article, but bears repeating because it is a lesson few grasp – the importance of communicating with loved ones.

Thirdly, provide a co-ordinated logistical support system of trained individuals to work directly with families following a loss; the family should have a single point of contact. Too often, so many different agencies and groups are involved that people feel overwhelmed; this can also lead to confusion and duplicate information, another source of frustration for families.

Fourthly, involve the families in the decision-making process concerning memorials, identification process, and return of personal belongings. Solicit family wishes and, where possible, honour those decisions on an individual basis. Some people will want to know everything, and may even want to have all human remains scientifically tested and recovered, while others will want to know very little and want no testing done. There are no right or wrong answers, only wrong ways of doing things.

## LISTENING

Finally, and often the most critical point is the ability to listen to what people tell us. In the next article, the best practice solution on meeting those principles will be discussed.

Crisis response plans are without emotion; responders and managers are often taught to focus on the overall goal. Coming face-to-face with those directly affected is not something you can prepare for in exercises; it is learned through exposure to multiple and repeated incidents. Manage it well and the rewards are priceless. Manage it poorly and some never recover. **CRJ**

## AUTHOR



**Robert A Jensen** is Chief Executive for Kenyon International Emergency Services and a Member of CRJ's Editorial Advisory Panel