

Crisis management part III: Families in disasters

In this issue, as part of *CRJ*'s series on helping crisis management leaders understand their responsibilities, **Salvador Velasco** and **Nick Haig** look at what happens when loved ones are involved in a mass fatality disaster

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A DISASTER, the priority has to be prompt, effective, humanitarian care, comfort and support given to those affected. These objectives are achieved through the operation and establishment of two types of family assistance facility: the FAC (Family Assistance Centre) and the FIC (Family Information Centre).

The FAC or FIC functions as the main focal point in the provision of support to and for affected families. These centres are where essential practical, compassionate and professional support are provided by meeting and addressing the immediate needs of families. This includes providing resources for short-term medical care and housing; connection with agencies that can assist with long-term solutions; assistance finding missing persons and identification of the deceased; psychological support; repatriation of the deceased; and the provision of memorial services. All this should be supplied on a 24/7 basis.

The decision to establish either centre depends upon the type of disaster. An FAC is the best choice for family welfare when the number of affected families is known (eg airplane crashes) and/or limited. In cases like these, the organisation responsible for providing care should give information to the families, make travel arrangements to the FAC, and provide accommodation and immediate financial support.

RESPONSIBILITY

In comparison, an FIC may be the best practice solution for family welfare in disasters affecting large geographical areas or other incidents where the status and number of victims is unknown; for example, hurricanes and earthquakes. In such disasters, the responsibility for providing humanitarian welfare to the persons affected falls under the jurisdiction of the local government or international organisations. Generally, when an FIC is established there is no provision made



Calm after crisis: Those working in crisis management should be in constant communication with those waiting for news on their loved ones

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to accommodate the families at the centre, but at relocation, evacuation or refugee centres. Historically, these have been established by the institutions in charge of the response.

An important decision to be made early in the process is the location of such a centre. The FAC, for example, should be located as near as is practical to the incident event site, but far away enough from the site that families are not exposed to the scene. The FIC, on the other hand, could be established in several key locations on the perimeter of the disaster area.

The standard FAC should be established in a venue with infrastructure to support the needed functions. The centre should contain the facilities to accommodate the immediate post-disaster needs of the families – such as housing, meals, etc. The FAC also requires an operational and care team to provide and manage the support given. The overall responsibility of the management team is to ensure a constant, and compassionate,

flow of information about loved ones.

The team typically includes a director and staff, who manage and operate specific functional areas including finances, information management, transportation, housing, information technology support, and security. The provision of welfare to the families is provided by a SAT (Special Assistance Team) and a dedicated Mental Health Team.

The FIC, on the other hand, functions as a facility that will provide a location where families can expect certain things:

- The centre should have a director and teams that will meet and greet the families, provide information, and redirect them to other support organisations that can assist in providing essential needs (eg financial help); and
 - A dedicated special assistance team should be in charge of helping DVI (Disaster Victim Identification) by collecting DNA material from family members. This team should also work with the morgue to collect information. The FIC should also manage this information through a database and be in constant communication with the families.
- In summary, both of these centres are key to providing the best support possible to those affected by disasters. Though both centres have distinct functions, their main purpose remains the same – to provide support and information to families, with both compassion and consummate professionalism. CRJ

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