

Crisis management part V: Caring for the deceased

Robert Jensen looks at the challenges faced when attending to the deceased, their personal property and their family members

A CRISIS IN WHICH HUMAN LIFE is lost or injured is far different and incredibly more difficult to manage than other events. For those involved in loss of life events, their life is profoundly changed. In no other area of crisis management is the individual and collective ability for long-term recovery so directly affected by actions of the response system.

For the deceased, key tasks include: Searching for and recovering mortal remains; determining how and why the death occurred; establishing positive identification; and making the mortal remains available to the legal next of kin for burial or cremation. It also means communicating the process to the families, involving them where possible and keeping them informed before the media begins reporting. And it means keeping the public informed.

For personal property, the key components are very similar. They include searching for and recovering personal property, determining if the property is useful as evidence, establishing ownership of the property and making it available to the legal next of kin. This process must also be communicated to the families, media and public.

RESPONSIBILITY

Complicating these tasks are four major challenges; the first is with the event itself. Mass casualty and fatality events are often highly destructive. Consider the injuries and damage to people and property following a bombing or aircraft accident. Unfortunately, in these events, mortal remains are greatly fragmented and dispersed throughout wide areas. In other cases they may be located in difficult or hostile terrain environments – areas which sometimes cover multiple distinct political jurisdictions, some of which do not maintain relationships with each other.

Secondly, there is no single response agency tasked with responsibility for the entire process of caring for the deceased and their property. Rarely do people train through the entire scope of these crises and, therefore, they



During the retrieval process, it is important that families are reunited with the possessions of their loved ones, which can often be scattered across a wide area, depending on the crisis

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may not know what to expect from the incident itself. More importantly they do not know what to expect from other agencies – where their responsibility ends and someone else's begins. For example, a search team looking for the living may simply knock on doors and mark the structure as cleared when no one answers. While that may solve the issue for the living, it does not address the needs of the deceased.

Thirdly, there is a lack of experienced staff and managers. While mass casualty and fatality events occur somewhat regularly, they do not occur in the same location. Therefore, when an event occurs and the various staff and managers respond, it is often the first time for the majority of those involved. Furthermore, few mass casualty or fatality events ever occur the same way twice, and the lessons learned in one may not help in another.

Fourthly, mass casualty and fatality events involve large groups of people; so systems must be prepared to support and work with families from various cultures, who may speak different languages and have different religious needs. Some may be afraid of government

agencies; others may be unable to travel to family assistance centres. Finally, some families do not get along. Even after losing a member of the family, they do not unite and may provide conflicting directions and requests.

There are no easy solutions to these challenges. However, they are not impossible or insurmountable. In the next article we will look at the practical application of caring for the deceased from search and recovery through to handing over responsibility of the remains. In the article following that, we will focus on the practical applications for managing the recovery and return of personal property.

Legal and moral responsibility dictates that governments and companies who may be involved in mass casualty and fatality events have plans and resources to care for the deceased and their personal property. However, we should go further and have an integrated and tested disaster recovery system. **CRJ**

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