

# Crisis management: Systems to manage your data

**Robert Jensen** looks at how major data management systems for victim identification can streamline information and ease demands upon grieving families

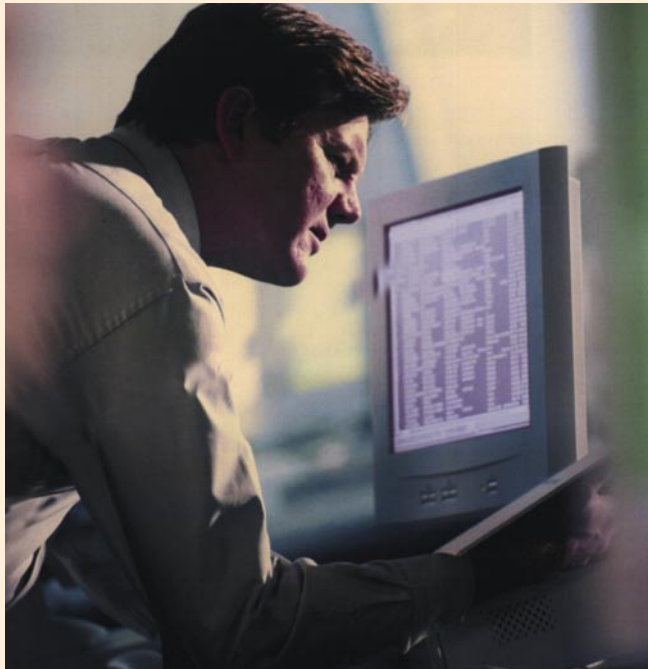
**D**ATA MANAGEMENT IS A KEY component in any mass fatality response programme. After all, we live in an information-driven age. Leaders are accustomed to seeing large amounts of information before making decisions. Politicians are used to having the most current statistics, diagrams and information metrics for public presentations. Media outlets compete to get the latest bits of information on their websites, both from traditional reports and individuals who happen to be on the scene. Finally, family and friends expect to reach out and speak, email, or text their loved ones with instant feedback. This is the world we live in and the world mass fatalities occur in.

## EXPECTATIONS

Unfortunately, mass fatalities do not fit neatly into those expectations. Few incident managers have practical experience of, or understand, the various applications and their limitations. Even more importantly, few jurisdictions have any of the systems in place, let alone trained users. Successfully managing the identification and release of the deceased involves four key data groups with multiple categories in each group.

The first group of applications is often the most ignored. It is the public enquiry or missing person's registration application. Reports of missing people and queries on the status of potential victims are received via various means. Input sources range from online submissions and phone centres to industry specific reports. Successful systems include the ability to link multiple reports from different individuals to a single, missing or directly affected individual. They include the capability to receive thousands of entries and continuous updates.

The second group of applications is used in collecting specific information about individuals that will be used to aid in their identification if human remains are recovered. As individuals are accounted for, and families and friends start to gather at family assistance centres, very specific information, often called *ante-mortem* information, is collected. It is used to create a



*Reports of missing people and queries from the public on the status of potential victims can be received online as well as by phone*

record which is then matched to those records created at the morgue. A category of this application includes systems to search existing government databases. Databases with useful information for identification include: Driver's licenses; criminal or police databases; birth registrations; immigration systems; military databases; and national identification systems.

The third group of applications is used in morgues for specific scientific or other technical functions. There are three categories. The first includes programmes to capture images for comparison, such as digital radiographs. The second category includes programmes to manage the logistics of tracking large numbers of biological samples, such as biopsies for DNA or toxicology. There are even applications for tracking human remains. The third category compares the records of a known individual with a large number of unknown individuals. Typical programmes include: Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems (AFIS); Dental identification programmes; and a multitude of programmes to match DNA profiles.

Finally, in many cases, a more general system which compares several key areas beyond dental, fingerprint or DNA, is also used.

The fourth and final group of applications is that used to manage the release and repatriation of human remains from the disaster morgue to funeral homes. Mass fatalities often involve severe fragmentation, which could result in the multiple releases of single individuals. Additionally, many mass fatality victims are part of family units. In some cases the legal next of kin want the deceased relatives repatriated at the same time.

As you have undoubtedly noted, no single application exists to cover all four areas. Therefore, to be successful, it is important that prior to an incident occurring, the unified command establish common applications and operational parameters. These should include ensuring that the systems can easily export and import data; agreement on common data elements, data element definitions; transfer protocols; security and integrity of the system; and most importantly, what it is you want the application to do?

A good application will ease the families' burden, by reducing the number of times they have to provide the same information. It will provide uniform information for daily updates and resource management, as well as setting realistic expectations for families and political leaders. Understand what applications are available; train staff to use those applications and, most importantly, start to build expectations for what information you will have and when you will have it. CRJ

■ *In the next series of articles, we will detail each of the four key groups and a subsequent area of data management in the personal effects process.*

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