



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE

NIST
National Institute of
Standards and Technology
U.S. Department of Commerce

Recommendation to the Attorney General Regarding a National Disaster Call Center

Subcommittee
Medicolegal Death Investigation
Status
Final

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Overview

There is a critical need for a National Disaster Call Center (NDCC) capability to more effectively and efficiently assist in the development of a victim manifest following a large scale mass casualty event. This center should be distinguished from 911 systems as the goal is to reduce the impact that these unexpected events place on these local systems following a large scale mass casualty event. Typically, data estimates that when a disaster occurs a call center could receive as many as 100 calls per missing person. The NDCC would be available for families and significant others to call when their loved one goes missing after a significant disaster event. Mass casualty incidents may span jurisdictions and over state lines, hence necessitating a national solution. It is unrealistic nor practical for local jurisdiction to manage, maintain or financially sustain these centers individually.

Recommendations

The National Commission on Forensic Science recommends that the Attorney General take the following action:

- **Recommendation #1: The Attorney General should direct the Department of Justice to develop, establish, and maintain a National Disaster Call Center to support the victim accounting process.**

The critical need to centralize a call center became apparent as far back as the London Blitz of WWII, during which time families needed a place to call to report a missing person or to inquire into the whereabouts of their loved one. Consequently England became the first country to develop a national call center for disaster victim identification known today as the UK National Casualty Call System. Similarly, New York City also established such a system in response to the need realized in the wake of 9/11. NYC received over 30,000 reports from families and others about

missing persons associated with the 2,753 known victims from the Attack on the World Trade Center, and this number is likely a dramatic underestimation because the call center did not exist during the immediate aftermath of the attack. Each call represents potentially valuable information towards the identification of a victim. Additionally, jurisdictions are generally unprepared to receive the immense number of calls that may be involved with any given event. For example, the UK National Casualty Call Center handled 121,000 calls in the seven days following the London Bombing incident in 2005.

One of the primary considerations to be addressed is the considerable cost to any individual jurisdiction associated with maintaining a comprehensive call center that stands at the ready in case of an incident. This is an impossible burden for a small county and it is unrealistic for the larger jurisdictions to assume the entirety of the burden, which is more than just cost, on behalf of the smaller jurisdictions in their region. It is both critical and logical that a well-trained and well-prepared national call center capability be developed to respond to any disaster within the United States, or possibly abroad if significant numbers of American victims are impacted. NDCC should receive financial and personnel support from the Department of Homeland Security and the National Disaster Medical System of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which also maintains the Disaster Mortuary Operations Teams (DMORT) which provides response services and assistance to medicolegal death investigation authorities.

The Department of Justice should consider leveraging the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a centralized repository and resource center, wholly owned by the Department of Justice, created primarily to support law enforcement, medical examiners and coroners with long-term missing and unidentified persons case management and identification within the United States. The NamUs system is currently developing a new tool which will provide software support for critical incident events. Law enforcement officers are wholly responsible for the collection, investigation and resolution of missing persons reports. Medical examiners and coroner's offices are responsible for the identification of all unidentified remains cases within their jurisdiction. It is critical that an effective system have both a well-equipped call center component and a technology management component that can be used in collaboration with federal, state, local and non-governmental humanitarian organizations that prepare and respond to incidents, accidents and disasters. The responsibility to account for all victims involved in a mass casualty incident lies firmly within the law enforcement and medicolegal investigative communities and we believe the Department of Justice has ultimate responsibility to assist these stakeholder communities in meeting their mission.