



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FORENSIC SCIENCE



Recommendation to the Attorney General National Disaster Call Center

Subcommittee
Medicolegal Death Investigation

Date of Current Version	02/18/2016
Approved by Subcommittee	02/18/2016
Approved by Commission	06/21/2016
Action by Attorney General	01/06/2017

Attorney General Action

The Department of Justice (DOJ) responded on January 6, 2017, by announcing its support of the principal goals of the Commission’s National Disaster Call Center proposal and has directed Department staff to share the recommendation with the Departments of Homeland Security and Health and Human Services. A liaison was appointed to work with these agencies to consider this recommendation and determine how agencies can coordinate efforts. For more information, please see the Attorney General’s Memorandum at:

<https://www.justice.gov/ncfs/page/file/930411/download>.

Commission Action

The Commission voted to adopt this Recommendation on June 21, 2016 by more than a two-thirds majority vote (93% yes, 7% no, 0% abstain).

Note: This document includes recommendations developed and adopted by the National Commission on Forensic Science and proposes specific acts that the Attorney General could take to further the goals of the Commission. The portion of the document directly labeled “Recommendations” represents the formal recommendations of the Commission. Information beyond that section is provided for context. This document does not necessarily represent the views of the Department of Justice or the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The National Commission on Forensic Science is a Federal Advisory Committee established by the Department of Justice. For more information, please visit:

<https://www.justice.gov/ncfs>.

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. Based on previous disaster data, 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 ones go missing after a significant disaster event. Mass-casualty incidents may span jurisdictions and cross state lines, hence necessitating a national solution. It is neither realistic nor practical for local jurisdictions to manage, maintain, or financially sustain these centers individually.

Recommendation

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

- **Recommendation: 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 World War II, during which families needed a place to call to report missing persons or to inquire into the whereabouts of their loved ones. Consequently, England became the first country to develop a national call center for disaster victim identification, known today as the U.K. National Casualty Call System. Similarly, New York City also established such a system in response to the need realized in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. NYC received more than 30,000 reports from families and others about missing persons associated with the 2,753 known victims from the attack, 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 toward 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 U.K. National Casualty Call Center handled 121,000 calls in the 7 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 regions. 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, which also maintains the Disaster Mortuary Operations teams (DMORT) that provide response services and assistance to medicolegal death investigation authorities.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) should consider leveraging the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a centralized repository and resource center, wholly owned by DOJ, 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 that 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 jurisdictions. 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 nongovernmental 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 missions.