

Emergency Services Times

Preparing a Framework for an Effective Mass Fatalities response

In an age of growing uncertainty, planning for worst case scenarios remains a challenging and often hidden part of an emergency responder's work. However it is also something that Dr Lucy Easthope feels incredibly privileged and proud to be involved with.

The task of preparing a 'mass fatalities framework' can be a daunting one and she advises planners both in the UK and internationally on how to tackle this: "A lot of people assume that this will be a negative and depressing aspect of my work" she says "but actually it can be a rewarding process, bringing out the most collaborative side of planners and is an example of a truly multi-agency plan".

To produce their plans, response agencies step outside their normal work to really consider the needs of families and communities in extremis, where a number of people have died and special arrangements are required - such as a transportation disaster. To plan effectively in this area responders are required to acknowledge a number of different processes, beyond the normal frameworks and consider a wide range of logistical and legislative options.

Some considerations when preparing a framework include:

Understanding the needs of affected friends and relatives -

This should be at the heart of the framework and should inform all aspects of the work. Responders should ensure that they are fully aware of the guidance available at www.disasteraction.org.uk which, as a charity, represents bereaved relatives and survivors from numerous UK and UK citizens caught up in overseas disasters.

Awareness of relevant legislation – the framework must comply with a broad set of legal obligations that goes beyond the Civil Contingencies Act including public health legislation, Human Tissue Act in England and Wales, Health and Safety, and crucially Coronial legislation which changed last year

The role of the HM Coroner – as awareness grows about the role of the Coroner as an essential part of the framework we see more and more good practice about how to integrate Coroners into both the planning process, exercises and training, and the final documents. Coroners are now advised on the particular challenges that a major incident could involved by a cadre of specialist advisory Coroners. It is also important to understand new developments that came into force last year such as the role of the Chief Coroner.

Disaster Victim Identification – This is a specific forensic process that applies scientific means to the remains recovered to establish identity and links that back to data gathered from family and friends. The DVI process sits within the Mass Fatalities Framework and it is crucial that the logistics, staffing etc for this process to take place are fully considered.

Meeting the needs of responders – This should never be an afterthought in the arrangements. There are a number of legal obligations on employers to ensure that responders are properly trained and prepared for this work and are supported both emotionally and practically throughout.

Recent case studies are also providing emergency responders with an insight into the very latest challenges that these incidents will bring: one example would be the large volume of personal effects that incidents may generate particularly if a mode of transport is involved. Dr Easthope specialises in the preparation of personal effects management strategies within the mass fatalities plan and has campaigned for many years for responders to recognise the importance of ensuring that consideration is given to how to store personal effects and make arrangements for their return to families. In August 2014 she visited the National Transportation Safety Board to explore how this challenge is being tackled by the American government and meets new expectations that have accompanied technologies such as smartphones and tablets.

Other 2014 challenges include the requirement for briefings and communication strategies that take into account the interest from all types of media into the specifics of the work including the Disaster Victim Identification process; and ensuring that arrangements meet local authority procurement and governance arrangements as Local Authorities are responsible for resourcing a mortuary on behalf of the HM Coroner.

In summary, for responders embarking on this planning process there are a range of resources to support their work and opportunities for peer review and mutual aid. *“There are innovative, compassionate and finely tuned arrangements being put in place all round the country”* says Dr Easthope *“It is heartening to see the efforts that are put in to work that hopefully they will never have to use”*.

***Dr Lucy Easthope is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Science at the University of Lincoln and is available at leasthope@lincoln.ac.uk
She is the course lead for ‘Planning for Mass Fatalities’ courses which run at the Emergency Planning College several times a year.***

Disaster Action have a new publication out this summer reviewing almost three decades of campaigning for change to support those affected by disaster. Information is available at <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Collective-Conviction-Story-Disaster-Action/dp/1781381232>

Image: The Interpol DVI Form

P_{ost}M_{ortem} (pink) VICTIM IDENTIFICATION FORM D4

DEAD BODY

Nature of disaster : _____ No : _____

Place of disaster : _____ Sex unknown

Date of disaster : Day Month Year Male Female

BODY SKETCH (described in item 22 and/or 31, 53)

B
I
N
D
I
N
G
H
O
L
E
S

Mark on charts

Damaged	
Burnt	
Decomposed	
Skeletonized	
Missing	
Loose	Please draw
Scars/Piercing	Please draw
Skin marks	Please draw
Tattoo marks	Please draw
Malformations	Please draw
Amputations	

B
I
N
D
I
N
G
H
O
L
E
S

[GB] version 2002