

Family Assistance Centers

Family Assistance Centers are designed to provide services and information to the family members of those killed and injured, as well as those people otherwise impacted by the incident.

Family Assistance Centers may be set up after the utilization of a Reunification Center, which is set up immediately after an incident. For the purposes of this toolkit, a Reunification Center is the term being used as the designated place used to reunify victims and their family members immediately after an incident or for family members of victims who were killed or injured to seek information and services. Family Assistance Center is the term that is being used in this toolkit as the place for victims and family members to get information and services once the reunification center is no longer being utilized. The same place utilized for a Reunification Center may be used for the Family Assistance Center. (Often these two terms are used interchangeably.)

Reunification Center (pre-Family Assistance Center) provides a venue for authorities to provide information to victims, coordinate access to support services, and facilitate the collection of information from families about the victims that can be used for victim identification. It is helpful to utilize a single Reunification Center so that all activities can be headquartered at that location. The Reunification Center may only be open for a few days and then may be transitioned into a Family Assistance Center. This can be important when the Reunification Center is located in facilities such as schools, churches, libraries, or organizations that will need access to the building within a couple of days. Families should be made aware that a Family Assistance Center will be created. A notice at the Reunification Center should be posted to directed families to the Family Assistance Center. Family Assistance Centers may be open for a few days to several weeks depending on the specific needs.

The need for timely and official factual information is continually identified as an important issue by families after a mass crisis incident. There is also a need for privacy as well as an avenue to receive services while waiting for information about the victims of the mass crisis incident. Family Assistance Centers provide responding agencies with the ability to provide a consistent and coordinated response to victims and families by centralizing the flow of information and services.

Family Assistance Centers not only provide a centralized point for information, but can give family members an opportunity to draw support from each other, obtain services from mental health providers, and utilized resources that are located at the Family Assistance Center.

Although each mass crisis incident is unique, there are common needs among the families of those known or presumed to have been killed, and those that were injured.

A response to a mass crisis incident is often divided into three phases: Acute/Emergency, Transitional, and Long-Term. This first phase is addressed in the section titled Initial Response. The second and third phase will be address in this section.

The need for a Family Assistance Center will depend on a variety of factors including the number of fatalities and serious injuries, the impact to the community, and the complexity of recovering and identifying fatal and injured victims. Family Assistance Centers should be situational, scalable, and needs-focused.

It is important to remember that many of the families of the deceased or injured victims may not live near the mass crisis site. It must be decided how communication with those families, especially those out of state, will be provided. One option is through the call center/hotline.

Consideration should be given to the specific needs of the victims. Victims who sustained minor injuries will have different needs than those with serious injuries. Family members of the deceased will have special unique needs. There may need to be separate meetings for different group of victims.

Goal of the Family Assistance Center

A Family Assistance Center provides a central location which is designed to ensure effective communication between agencies responsible for the provision of family assistance services; ensure efficient delivery of family assistance services by assessing needs, identifying gaps, avoiding duplication of services; and coordinating/managing requests for services. Creating a victim centered approach will facilitate the delivery of effective services.

At the Family Assistance Center, there needs to be a management team composed of members from all the key agencies who can make decisions and allocate/access resources. Family Assistance Center “staff” should continuously monitor events, reactions and needs of families and establish a process for receiving, acting on, and disseminating information.

The staff at the Family Assistance Center should work closely with the Incident Command staff to determine family briefings, ensure victim privacy and make sure there is good communication and collaboration among agencies.

There needs to be a plan as to:

1. How long-term victim/family specific services and future information will be provided once victims have been identified and families return home to plan funerals/burials and continue in their process of grief and recovery, and

2. Address the needs of the severely injured victims.

Develop a process for determining access of individuals into the Family Assistance Center.

Location of the Family Assistance Center

The location should be a place that ideally is near the incident scene, but not in walking distance. It should be ADA (American with Disabilities Act) compliant. Food and water should be available on-site. Ideas for locations include schools, libraries, hotels, churches. The facility needs to be available for the duration of the response so that families know where to go to for services. It should be an adequate size to accommodate the families and daily influx of service providers. Plan on at least 4-6 family members per victim or survivor when deciding on a location. Media should not be permitted in the Family Assistance Center.

Ideally, the facility should include:

- Large meeting room for gatherings and briefings
- Smaller meeting rooms for private meetings with individual families
- Security from the media and others
- Room/office for the Family Assistance “staff”

Things to consider when choosing a Family Assistance Center:

- Security of the facility
- Check in and out points for families and survivors
- Identification badges and security procedures
- Communication equipment (computers, phones, audio-visual, public address system)
- Child care
- Access to emergency medical care
- Crisis interventions specialists
- Access to clergy
- Financial services
- Travel assistance
- Local transportation
- Meals
- Clothing and toiletries

Role of Victim Advocates

Victim advocates working at the Family Assistance Center need to be highly trained and experienced. They need to be flexible, able to function in a variety of roles, and understand the boundaries of their responsibilities.

Victim advocates may provide crisis intervention, assist with practical needs, assess and match needs and resources, and serve as a conduit for information. Victim advocates may also provide a companion role to families as they navigate the resources in the Family Assistance Center.

Role of Mental Health Providers

Initially, families and victims will have intense reactions to the tragedy that has just occurred. Initial efforts should focus on providing compassionate support and information that will help them cope and bolster resilience. Many people will seek additional mental health services at a later time. Mental health professionals can identify individuals who may either have pre-existing issues or may be in extreme distress.

Conclusion

Family Assistance Centers can be an extremely useful tool for family members. If a facility has not been previously identified in your community that could be used, it is not too late. Contacts can be made and facilities can be made available relatively quickly. Utilize the resources in your community!

Information in this section was utilized from a document published by the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Office for Victim Assistance's publication titled Mass Fatality Incident Family Assistance Operations – Recommended Strategies for Local and State Agencies. The full document is located in the Additional Resources Section.