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# In the Event of Disaster: family assistance programmes

**Most of our endeavours are designed to prevent acts of unlawful interference taking place, yet airlines must also prepare for disasters. What are the key elements of disaster preparedness programmes and how can they benefit both the airline and the family members of the passengers and crew embroiled in a hijacking or, worse still, the loss of an aircraft? Sue Warner-Bean discusses.**

Fifteen years ago, stories abounded of airlines' ill-treatment of families and survivors after the loss of an aircraft: no access to information; notification messages left on answering machines; personal effects discarded; unidentified remains buried without notice. None of it was intentional; accidents were (and are) rare, and the post-crash emphasis was solely on determining cause and preventing future tragedies. There were no industry regulations, guidance papers or ICAO manuals outlining the basic tenets of family and survivor assistance, and airlines were left to make it up for themselves.

While such stories can still be found, there has been progress. Many airlines, some governments, and most insurers recognise the necessity of providing immediate, coordinated, compassionate assistance to those most affected by aviation tragedies. After all, at the end of the day it is the human toll of these events that is most devastating. Planes can be replaced. Loved ones cannot.

## Rationale and Expectations

For airlines, having a strong family assistance programme is more than an ethical and moral obligation. It is also an operational necessity; a growing expectation of the public, stakeholders, lawyers and insurers; and in some cases, a legal requirement.

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This tenth anniversary year of the 11th September 2001 attacks is also the fifteenth anniversary of the US Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996. This landmark law was the result of intense lobbying by crash survivors and

victims' families (including families of Pan Am 103), who then partnered with airline and government representatives to develop recommendations and ultimately, legislation for air disaster response. It requires the creation of a federal plan, as well as individual airline plans, assigning responsibilities for various victim assistance tasks. Similar laws with varying levels of detail were subsequently enacted in Brazil, Australia, South Korea and China. Most recently, Article 21 of EU 996/2010 requires EU member states and all airlines operating in their territory to have civil aviation accident emergency plans that include "assistance to the victims of civil aviation accidents and their relatives," although the exact nature of that assistance is not well-defined. Some direction is provided in ICAO Circular 285-AN/166, *Guidance on Assistance to Aircraft Accident Victims and their Families*, but in the absence of detailed national plans, it is

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still incumbent on the airlines to define the standards.

So what is required for a family assistance programme, and how can it benefit both victims and the airline?

At the most basic level, aviation disaster family assistance is simple: if it were your family member on the affected aircraft, how would you want to be treated? In the immediate aftermath, most would say they want **timely and accurate notification, access to resources and all relevant information**, and the identification and return of loved ones and their belongings. They would want acknowledgement, answers, apologies, accountability, counselling and compensation. And they would certainly want their needs to be met with urgency, efficiency, equity, and compassion.

Yet for airlines, those needs are deceptively simple. Meeting them is a complex and resource-intensive process that requires a well-crafted and rehearsed plan, trained staff, adequate resources, coordination with authorities and insurers, and support from senior management.

It's been said that "when you've seen one accident, you've seen one accident." Although there are no "typical" accidents, there are generally three phases to the family assistance response: **initial contact, site operations, and long-term support**. A closer look at each can help shed light on both families' concerns and the airline's response requirements.

### **Phase One: Initial Contact (0-48 hours)<sup>1</sup>**

Contacting the relatives of passengers and crew is the crucial first step in family assistance and is also critical for the airline and authorities. Families will help in identifying hospitalised and deceased victims, and in criminal events may provide valuable information to the investigation.

The initial contact with the family is to confirm that the event has happened and advise whether or not the loved



one's name appears on the manifest. In the words of one family member, "it is the call (or conversation) that changes everything" and must be handled with sensitivity and by trained personnel.

There are several scenarios here, some in the airlines' control, some not. Families may hear about the event through the media (including social media), from co-workers or friends, or, as we learned during the 11th September 2001 hijackings, from the passengers themselves via phone and text messages. In all of these instances family members

will likely attempt to reach the airline immediately for confirmation and additional information. Other families may be at the airport arrivals or departure area and will need to be gathered in a private room to await and receive information. Still others may be unaware of the disaster until they are located and advised by the airline or authorities.

National law will dictate whether initial notification is conducted by the police or the airline. In either case it must be done quickly and compassionately, and the airline must be prepared to field an



An airline drill can be useful in preparing for the aftermath of an actual accident  
(Credit: Sue Warner-Bean)

extremely high volume of incoming calls for the first 24-36<sup>2</sup> hours by immediately establishing a **Telephone Enquiry Centre (TEC)** with a toll-free (free phone) number. The TEC will assist in filtering enquiries to identify callers who have a relationship to those on board the aircraft. Those who are likely “matches” are referred for confirmation and notification by a trained airline team member or the authorities.

Complicating factors in this process include manifest accuracy, language and cultural differences, data tracking (including identifying which family members are at airports), information on survivors’ status and whereabouts, and sufficient phone capacity. The conversations will be emotionally difficult and staff must be prepared to respond to needs and requests. Smaller airlines may not have the

resources to perform this function effectively and may need to rely on assistance from codeshare and alliance partners or qualified vendors.

As the response progresses to phase two, the TEC will transition to a telephone support centre to assist families with information and logistical arrangements.

### Phase Two: Site Operations (1-21 days)<sup>3</sup>

Once families receive initial notification they often wish to travel to the accident location. They go there to be with surviving loved ones or to bring home those who perished. They typically want access to information about the victim, their belongings, the crash site, the sequence of events, or a myriad of other issues; or they may need to visit the site for cultural or religious reasons. It is the airline’s responsibility to make these arrangements and to have the procedures, staff and financial resources in place to do so.

To accommodate families, a **Family Assistance Centre (FAC)** is established by the airline at a city near the crash site, often in a hotel with a large meeting space<sup>4</sup>. This facility is a gathering place for families where they can receive regular

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updates from the airline and authorities, and where their immediate and short-term needs can be met. Security, regularly scheduled briefings and an array of basic services (food, child

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**To accommodate families, a Family Assistance Centre (FAC) is established by the airline at a city near the crash site, often in a hotel with a large meeting space.**

care, counselling, communications, badging, basic medical care, financial assistance, etc.) are crucial. The airline should also assign trained staff representatives, ideally two per each family unit. These **Special Assistance Team (SAT)** members will provide critical support and serve as a link between airline and families during the second phase of response.

Generally airlines should anticipate 4-6 family members at the FAC per person on board the aircraft. The exact number depends on factors such as the accident location, size of families, and the airline's own policy for family travel. When possible the airline's own SAT team members, logistics and administrative staff should be lodged away from the FAC so that duty rotations and rest times can be more easily established.

Scheduled events and daily milestones will help to create a sense of process at the FAC and will be helpful to families and staff alike. Informational briefings should be conducted twice daily or more often as needed, with updates on search

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and rescue or recovery, the victim identification process (including the procedures for ante-mortem interviews), the investigation, the recovery of personal belongings, possible site visits<sup>5</sup>, group memorial services, and any other relevant information. These are conducted by the airline or by the authorities, depending on national law, and should include spokespeople from each of the represented organisations. For the airline, the spokesperson should be a senior executive able to convey the company's sorrow and genuine concern for family and survivor needs.

Not all families choose to travel to the accident location, and those who remain at home must be given the same information and consideration as those at the FAC, including assignment of SAT members and access to briefings by conference call or private webcast.

**The FAC will eventually shut down. When that happens is typically determined by how quickly victims can be identified...**

The FAC will eventually shut down. When that happens is typically determined by how quickly victims can be identified and whether families are confident they will continue to have access to information and support. If the victim identification process is relatively quick (a matter of days or weeks, rather than months), families may wait so that they can return home with their loved ones' remains. If the process is lengthier (typically due to the condition of remains), families will likely return home provided they are kept informed of progress and developments.

FAC operations are complex and challenging – organisationally, logistically, administratively and

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psychologically. Airlines must be prepared to locate and secure suitable facilities immediately, as they will be competing with the media and others for hotels. As with phase one of the response, complications include language and cultural differences, data management, and sufficient staff. Additionally, much will depend on effective coordination with local and national authorities, and in some locations a significant amount of cash (not just credit cards) will almost certainly be required. Again, smaller carriers may need the assistance of marketing partners or vendors to respond effectively.

**The FAC meets important needs for family members, and despite its challenges it is also valuable for the airline.**

The FAC meets important needs for family members, and despite its challenges it is also valuable for the airline. It centralises communications, resources and support. It provides a means to give consistent, accurate, and credible information to families. Having families present aids in the victim identification process, and many families have said that they draw support from being with others in a similar circumstance. At its best, the FAC is a practical and tangible demonstration of the airline's concern for affected families.



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**The first two phases of response can be described as acute; the third is chronic. It demands fewer airline resources but no less attention...**

### **Phase Three: Long-Term Support (one month to one year and beyond)<sup>6</sup>**

The first two phases of response can be described as acute; the third is chronic. It demands fewer airline resources but no less attention, and a post-response organisation should be established at the airline to manage ongoing family assistance concerns. This provides continuity of care for families and survivors and ensures consistency, coordination and communication between affected airline departments and staff.

Some of the focus in this phase is on previously-discussed needs: identification and repatriation of remains; burials and funerals; return of personal belongings (a complex and potentially lengthy process best-suited to vendor assistance); ongoing questions about the investigation and circumstances of the crash. But other issues also come to the fore: financial assistance and claim settlement (dictated in part by the Montreal Convention); counselling and psychological support; commemoration of anniversaries; construction of a monument. It is natural, then, that in this phase airline responsibilities typically transition to risk managers, claims managers and insurers, with continued involvement by the emergency response manager. Lawsuits are another inevitability of phase three and lawyers will also have an extensive role. And in criminal events many families will seek "truth and justice". (see Danièle Klein's excellent article on UTA flight 772, *Aviation Security International* April 2011)

### **Conclusions**

In time, the tragedy will become an event of the past: claims will be resolved, anniversaries commemorated, a monument built, and the event relegated to the airline's collective memory. For families it is different. A woman who lost her 22-year-old daughter in a crash said that it is "like an amputation: one learns to compensate, but a part of you is always missing." How families begin that



*A memorial service organised or supported by the airline can be a very powerful step in the healing process for families. (Credit: Sue Warner-Bean)*

process of "compensating" depends on a number of factors, including how the airline responds.

**Meet with insurers; family assistance is typically included in coverage, and they may also have funds available for training and development.**

Preparation is the key. Ensure senior management understands and supports the programme. Do a gap assessment. Select and train staff, including TEC and SAT members. Negotiate mutual aid agreements and contract with vendors if necessary. Meet with insurers; family assistance is typically included in coverage, and they may also have funds available for training and development. Write and refine procedures. Arrange financial resources. Develop critical relationships; it's been said that "the worst first call is when you need something." And practice.

When tragedy strikes your airline, its passengers and families, you can never be completely ready, but it's the right thing to do – and it's smart business – to be prepared. ■

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1. Times are estimates for planning purposes only and will vary based on circumstances
2. Some airlines have reported up to 40,000 calls to the TEC in the first 24 hours. Past accidents have shown that many enquiries may come from families of employees, particularly crew. A "phone home" policy can reduce TEC volumes by as much as a third. When they learn about an accident, unaffected employees should immediately advise their own families that they were not involved.
3. Length of site operations can vary widely based on circumstances. While 2-3 weeks is average, two airlines surveyed advised that their Family Assistance Centres remained operational for 60 days.
4. In rare instances the airline may establish two or more family assistance centres. Air France 447 was a mid-ocean accident with a large number of French and Brazilian citizens on board. There was no way to establish a family assistance centre near the site, so FACs were established in the origin (Rio de Janeiro) and destination (Paris) cities.
5. A site visit is a one-time coordinated effort between the investigative authority and the airline. It should be done after human remains and belongings have been removed from the wreckage. Investigative and recovery work is temporarily halted. Families who wish to see the crash site, accompanied by mental health counsellors, are brought to a secure area some distance from the wreckage where they can leave remembrances, observe religious rites, or simply grieve. If the crash location is not accessible, alternatives such as a fly-over may be considered.
6. Times are estimates for planning purposes only and will vary based on circumstances