



Jurisprudence Section – 2003

E7 Volunteer Opportunities for Forensic Scientists: What You Can Do to Fight Terrorism

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The goal of this presentation is to provide members of AAFS with information on volunteer opportunities in which professional skills can be applied to terrorism detection, prevention, and recovery.

Forensic scientists are well trained and experienced in job specialties that have particular relevance to the war on terrorism. Increasingly, members of the forensic professions are being asked to work on terrorism cases as a part of their occupational roles and are having an important impact on detection, investigation, evidence preservation, and prosecution. Nevertheless, many seek other opportunities to serve and find considerable satisfaction as well as a breadth of relevant experience by working as member of the many volunteer and public service organizations that have become overburdened by the demands placed on them a post 9/11 world.

Disaster and emergency services have undergone dramatic changes over the past several decades. The Civil Defense system, organized to meet community needs during the War years and the Cold War, has been largely supplanted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and its state counterparts. While these were once secret agencies, operating out of closed bunkers, they have now transformed themselves into training and coordination centers dedicated to helping people plan for and address local emergency needs. These agencies serve as clearinghouses for information, assist in the location of essential emergency equipment and supplies, and help to assemble response teams and get them to where they are most needed.

Emergency response teams now operate under a uniform administrative structure known as the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS consists of a Commander and a command staff of Information, Safety, and Liaison officers; supported by Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Administration & Finance Sections with responsibilities similar to those of their military counterparts. The World Trade Center rescue and recovery efforts were organized under ICS, with operational units drawn from around the country. Each operational unit in turn has its own ICS structure, and its areas of responsibility closely parallel the sections of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

While people are all familiar with search and rescue teams, they have now been joined by federally designated Urban Search and Rescue Teams (USRT) that specialize in rescue and recovery from collapsed buildings such as Oklahoma City and WTC. These Teams rely upon skilled construction experts, and can use the services of engineering scientists. Both urban and rural search and rescue has evolved into reliance upon behavioral science data which is continually updated to show the most likely paths of movement and behaviors of people lost under specific circumstances, and forensic specialist with behavioral and statistical analytic skills can make significant contributions to their operations.

Terrorist attacks create important needs for medical practitioners and for the identification of human remains. FEMA and its local counterparts coordinate such teams, including DMORT teams typically operated by morticians; but there are obvious roles for forensic odontologists, pathologists, and physical anthropologists to support their efforts – particularly when their sites of operation are also classified as crime scenes.

Toxicologist, criminalists, and even question document experts and virtually all other forensic specialist bring both specific and general skills to disaster situations, recovery efforts, and crime scene investigations; and when not deployed by their official agency, can be of great help as volunteers.

Mental health has become an increasingly recognized specialty in disaster services, and there are several agencies that deploy licensed mental health practitioners. For psychologists, the American Psychological Association, in partnership with the American Red Cross, created the Disaster Response Network (DRN) in the early 1990s to make disaster mental health services available when needed. The DRN has chapters in most states, and welcomes volunteers. Psychiatric societies and social work associations have followed suit, and are forming similar volunteer support networks. Each of these disaster mental health networks can also work in conjunction with the Red Cross, which under federal legislation is the designated lead agency in aviation and certain other mass fatality disasters. Following 9/11, which was clearly aviation-related, Red Cross and its disaster mental health (DMH) units worked around the clock, and will continue to support the 9/11 survivors for years to come.

Finally, attorneys have a number of rolls. Everyone, on every side, needs lawyers; and FEMA deploys them on a regular basis. In Boston, and certainly other areas, the Bar Association deployed volunteers to Mosques where they helped to quiet fears and provided information on rights and on working with law enforcement to deal with threats against Islamic citizens and groups. Lawyers provided support to survivors of 9/11 on everything from obtaining death certificates to qualifications for survivor benefits. They worked with prosecutors and they defended the accused – helping to preserve the legal and political system that terrorists were determined to destroy, and assuring the highest possible level of fairness and justice.

Whatever citizens elect to do to support anti-terrorist and disaster efforts, it is critical that they become involved as soon as possible while this nation is not in a crisis. There is a saying in disaster services that the last place to meet is at the scene of a disaster. Operations progress smoothly when people know each other, have formed relationship, are well trained and prepared, and know what to expect.



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Volunteer Opportunities, Terrorism, Forensic Skill Applications