D77 Working Together: Utilization of Outside Resources When Dealing With a Mass Fatality

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the importance of resource utilization by the Medical Examiner's Office when dealing with a mass fatality.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by detailing how a small Medical Examiner's Office responded to a mass fatality incident on a major interstate, effectively, by identifying available resources and calling upon them at the onset of an incident. Instead of waiting until the scene of a mass fatality has been processed, or getting to a scene and realizing more help is needed, resources were called upon at the onset of the incident, thus allowing for an effective and precise investigation.

On January 29, 2012, fog and smoke from nearby wildfires blanketed a low-lying area of Interstate 75 in Gainesville, Florida, at approximately 0400 hours. Vehicles traveling on the roadway at high speeds suddenly experienced zero visibility, resulting in a multi-vehicle crash on the northbound and southbound lanes of the Interstate stretching a little over one mile. The Medical Examiner's Office was notified that multiple fatalities were confirmed on scene at approximately 0600 hours.

The Medical Examiner's Office consists of three full-time investigators, one part-time investigator, two autopsy technicians, and three pathologists. When the on-call investigator was notified of the incident, contact was immediately made with the Chief Medical Examiner and the Director of Operations. Quickly, it was established that the Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System (FEMORS) should be activated and deployed to offer resources and staff. All team members, which included all Medical Examiner's Office staff, FEMORS personnel, and transport personnel met at the Medical Examiner's Office at 0800 hours for a briefing.

FEMORS personnel started a Victim Identification Center (VIC) that allowed for people to report missing individuals that may have been involved in the crash, providing resources for identification. At the time of the crash, there were eight unidentified individuals. Because the VIC was implemented at the onset of the incident, antemortem information was readily available to guide the process of gathering postmortem comparison information.

The northbound lanes consisted of multiple vehicles with deceased located in two separate vehicles. Two decedents were in a small passenger car and five decedents were located in a minivan. With the assistance of FEMORS personnel, scene photography, scene sketching and decedent photography was accomplished efficiently in various stages. Prompt processing of the northbound scene allowed for decedents to be transported to the Medical Examiner's Office for processing and autopsy. FEMORS personnel located at the Medical Examiner's Office were instrumental in being able to process the decedents as they arrived to assist the two autopsy technicians and pathologists.

The southbound lane crash involved two vehicles that had become fully engulfed in flames from two semi-tractor trailers catching on fire. The result was that two vehicles with decedents were severely burned. At this time, the Medical Examiner's Office contacted the C.A. Pound Human Identification Laboratory and a board certified forensic anthropologist responded to the scene. This allowed for an expert opinion on the most effective way to preserve the burned remains. The majority of the remains of one individual from one vehicle could be removed on scene. An unknown number of individuals remained in the second vehicle. On the advice of the physical anthropologist, both vehicles were towed to a local law enforcement facility for later processing.

From January 30, 2012, through February 2, 2012, both vehicles were processed by a team of physical anthropology graduate analysts, as well as forensic odontologists from FEMORS. The expert archeological techniques and knowledge of burned bone identification and preservation allowed for maximum recovery of remains as well as identification of personal effects. Having forensic odontologists at the site allowed for *in situ* examination of dentition given the extremely fragile nature of the remains. In all, three individuals were recovered from the second vehicle.

The proactive measures of the on-call investigator and the Medical Examiner's Office team to identify, call upon, and utilize outside resources to their fullest extent allowed the Medical Examiner's Office to effectively identify the remains and investigate the deaths of eleven individuals.

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