



F6 Fatality Management of a Multi-Vehicle Accident

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain insight in the management of an accident with multiple fatalities by a state disaster team, Florida Emergency Mortuary Operational Response System (FEMORS). The overall result was the expeditious identification of the victims utilizing the appropriate resource allocation and minimum miscalculations. The nimble response was the result of 10 years of training augmented by several incident activations, including two minor hurricanes.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the efficiency of a successful disaster mitigation team, despite its limited size.

FEMORS was established in 2002 as part of the Health Department's ESF-8 Division of Emergency Management. Since then, FEMORS has been alerted for four hurricanes and activated for two more during the busy 2004 – 2005 hurricane seasons. Over the last 10 years, the team has engaged in annual disaster training including bi-yearly mock disasters. One of the important lessons learned from previous incidents is the importance of utilizing an assessment team deployed in advance to evaluate the true needs of the medical examiner. For example, initial estimates of deaths for both hurricanes Charley and Ivan were 20 – 60. These predictions were grossly inaccurate and, in the case of Hurricane Charley, led to a misallocation of valuable resources. Attendees will see in this case that the decisions of the assessment team and incident commander led to an efficient activation of only those resources actually needed for the incident. The entire operation was completed in four days utilizing limited personnel and resources with a total cost of approximately \$20,000.

The Incident: Interstate I-75 Accident, Paynes Prairie, Florida, January 29, 2012. At about 4:00 a.m. on I-75 in Alachua County, just south of Gainesville, Florida, dense smoke from a brush fire along with fog rendered a stretch of the highway completely impenetrable.

Two major crashes occurred within minutes of each other due to vehicles stopping on the roadway. The northbound crash involved eight vehicles resulting in seven deaths and the southbound accident resulted in another four deaths and fire. Initially, there were thought to be 20 deaths and counting. In addition, there were dozens of victims taken to several hospitals with various injuries.

By 6:00 a.m., the Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) notified the Medical Examiner's (ME's) office of the accident and by 6:15 a.m., the Commander of FEMORS was also notified. FEMORS was activated for deployment a little more than an hour later. By 10:00, the entire designated team of 16 FEMORS members, including the assessment team, investigators, VIC personnel, forensic odontologists, and command staff, were either already on the scene or on their way from various locations in Florida to the command center at the ME's office.

Two of the charred vehicles with occupants were moved to the Sheriff's office for collection of remains by 3:00 p.m. and the VIC center was conducting interviews with relatives by 4:00 p.m. By mid-afternoon the next day, Monday, five of the victims had been positively identified with two more presumptively identified. On Tuesday, 15 of the 16 individuals on all the missing person reports were accounted for, with one being one of the victims. Tuesday was devoted to careful extraction of burned, fragmented, and comingled victims from two vehicles by the forensic anthropologists and odontologists. One family had not been declared missing initially. Infrared (IR) examination of a charred document led to the names of the remaining individuals.

Finally, on Wednesday morning, the forensic odontologist identified the final victim, a 17-year-old female passenger. FEMORS was deactivated that day with a total of four days activation. Over the next several days, the medical examiner completed the final reports for identification.

Deficiencies were few and minor with the exception of the possibility of an incorrect identification by the hospital between two sisters of one family. Teamwork between the medical examiner and staff, FHP, and the FEMORS team led to an efficient recovery and identification of the victims.

Vehicular Accident, Disaster Response, Incident Response