



### A106 Decedent Tracking: A Need for an Accurate Headcount in the Medical Examiner's Office

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**Learning Overview:** After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the need for a strong decedent tracking system, critical factors of a successful tracking system, and the need for supportive standard operating procedures. Failure to properly handle decedent inventory is a problem that many medical examiner offices have faced, including the Puerto Rico Bureau of Forensic Sciences (in Spanish, Negociado de Ciencias Forenses (NCF)).

**Impact on the Forensic Science Community:** This presentation will impact the forensic sciences community by addressing that the difficulties that NCF faced immediately and long after Hurricane Maria are not unique to Puerto Rico or to a mass disaster event. The lessons learned through evaluating the NCF decedent tracking system and developing tools that can assist with decedent handling and storage are informative to medical examiner offices throughout the world.

On September 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria, a Category 5 hurricane, made landfall in Puerto Rico, causing widespread devastation to the island's infrastructure. Initially, the death count from the storm was reported as 65 individuals; a year later, it was corrected to 2,975 individuals. The unfathomable discrepancy is an indication of the breakdown of systems that affected nearly all agencies on the island. The NCF was not immune to the devastation and experienced loss of personnel and resources that jeopardized the laboratory's accreditation and interrupted the forensic science services provided to the Puerto Rican criminal justice system. As the impact of Hurricane Maria accumulated, NCF found itself overwhelmed with decedent inventory. In January of 2019, more than a year after the hurricane, NCF required additional refrigerated trailers from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to handle the decedent inventory.

In 2018, the National Association of Attorneys General (NAAG) received a request from the Puerto Rico Public Safety Secretary for assistance in steadying the NCF. NAAG, in turn, requested the assistance of the American Society of Crime Laboratory Directors (ASCLD), and together these organizations began a multidisciplinary response. One component of the response was to assess the NCF system for decedent tracking and inventory. In order to understand the system, the standard operating procedures governing mortuary operations and decedent identification were reviewed, the facility was toured, and key staff members were interviewed. Decedent processing from receipt to release was mapped.

During the assessment, several obstacles to implementing a strong decedent inventory system were identified. Most notable was the use of three independent electronic data management systems, each with a slightly different purpose. None of the systems served as the master system with complete, accurate, and current information. Furthermore, none of the systems were capable of reporting a list of decedents that were received by NCF but not yet released. Decedent inventories were manually generated by staff visualizing each body bag and writing down the case number on an inventory form. This approach required a significant number of man-hours, placed staff in an uncomfortable work environment (refrigerated coolers) for a lengthy period of time, and was found to be error prone. An additional obstacle was that bodies were not examined until a family member presented to NCF and initiated the identification process. This caused significant delays in the release of the body in many cases. Finally, tentatively identified and unidentified decedents were collectively identified as John and Jane Does, putting at risk critical information needed to facilitate positive identification.

The results of the assessment (audit date April 24, 2019) indicated that NCF's decedent storage capacity, including fixed and temporary storage units, was 295 decedents. NCF was storing 269 bodies. Eighty-four of the bodies were received in 2018 or before. The longest-held body was received in 2010. Forty of the decedents were positively identified and awaiting examination. Fifty-seven of the decedents were classified as Jane or John Doe. Forty of the decedents were ready to be released (positively identified and completed examination). One body had been approved for release in 2015. The identification, examination, or release status of the remaining 48 bodies could not be determined at the time of the assessment.

It became apparent during the assessment that NCF was storing bodies unnecessarily for a lengthy period of time, contributing to the storage space shortage. A centralized data management system that could be used to track the decedent receipt date, identification status, examination completion date, and the ready-for-release date was needed. Until such a data management system can be procured, the assessors developed a spreadsheet to track each decedent and calculate the length of time each body was held at each stage of the process (e.g., length of time between identification and examination). The tool could be used to assist the mortuary operation supervisor in tracking decedents and ensuring unclaimed decedents are released for final disposition in a timely manner following the Puerto Rico statute (25 L.P.R. § 3600).

#### **Mortuary Management, Decedent Tracking, Decedent Handling**