



G15 Hurricane Michael: The Role of the Forensic Odontologist

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the role of the forensic odontologist as a responding member of the Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System (FEMORS) during the Hurricane Michael mass disaster.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by demonstrating the significant role of mass disaster teams. Attendees will learn the mission of FEMORS and the assistance that the team was able to provide to the local district medical examiner's office during a declared disaster.

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael made landfall in the Florida Panhandle as a Category 5 hurricane. Panama City, Mexico Beach, and surrounding towns suffered catastrophic destruction. Hurricane Michael caused in excess of \$25 billion dollars in damage and more than forty-five lives were lost in Florida.

The FEMORS was formed in July 2002. It is a portable morgue with a team of professionals that train annually with the mission of assisting and supporting the local district medical examiner's office during a mass incident. The state of Florida and the William Maples Center for Forensic Medicine have implemented protocols to respond to these disasters. A mission assignment was activated from the Florida Department of Health, and the FEMORS team prepared to deploy from the State Emergency Operations Center in Tallahassee on October 11, 2018. The FEMORS commander managed the deployment from the Emergency Operations Center in Tallahassee, FL. The retired FEMORS commander deployed with the activated team members to Panama City, FL.

The Disaster Portable Morgue Units (DPMU) arrived first and prepared to set up the morgue in Defuniak Springs, FL. The FEMORS team worked with the Air National Guard Search and Recovery Team. The District 14 medical examiner's office in Panama City began preparing for mass fatalities.

Despite the overwhelming destruction and devastation to areas of Panama City, Mexico Beach, and surrounding areas, the medical examiner's office in Panama City remained relatively unscathed. There was the immediate loss of power, water, and technological resources. Florida's death toll from Hurricane Michael was greater than 40 as of November 2018. The fatalities were reported in Bay, Gadsden, Franklin, Liberty, Jackson, Leon, Gulf, and Washington counties. The majority of the decedents were elderly. There were deaths as a result of storm surge, collapsed structures, crushing trees, post-storm cleanup, inability to access medical care, and homicidal/suicidal violence. The numbers continue to rise as a result of post-storm cleanup and reconstruction.

The Odontology section of FEMORS is composed of dentists, hygienists, and dental assistants. The volume of fatalities were not overwhelming for the local medical examiner's office and since the decedents were arriving slowly over several days, the entire FEMORS team was not deployed. The activated forensic odontologist worked with the Air National Guard, medical examiner, medical examiner staff, and other FEMORS team members. Some team members slept at the morgue due to generalized destruction of infrastructure, downed trees, and long transportation times to the community center facilities. During the deployment, postmortem radiographs were obtained on incoming decedents. Antemortem records were initially difficult to access due to lack of power, closed/damaged dental offices, lack of cellular phone service, etc. Upon receipt of antemortem radiographs, dental identifications were made.

Mass Disaster, Medical Examiner, Odontologist