Trends in Air Disaster Family Assistance
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**Executive Summary**

This report studies the trends that have taken place in recent years in the assistance provided by airlines to the family and friends of those involved in plane crashes. In just the last few years, the field evolved more than it had in the prior century, thanks in large part to the advocates that emerged from several high-profile aviation accidents.

Since the beginning of passenger aviation to the 1980s, with few exceptions almost no airline family assistance response to aircraft crashes took place. In fact, right up until the 1980’s it seems aircraft crashes took on a sort of “hush up deal” according to Erik Gros of the National Transportation Safety Board. In the early and mid 1990s some limited but poorly structured assistance was provided. Disappointingly handled accidents like the Pan Am World Airways Flight 103 in Scotland, Valujet 592 in Florida, and TWA Flight 800 near New York provided a society, whose interest in the treatment of air disaster victims was quickly evolving, with ample ammunition to justify the need for change to their legislators. Advocacy groups like the National Air Disaster Alliance and an ever-growing panel of disaster victim’s family members emerged eager to share their stories in Congressional hearings and seek a change for the better.

After 1997, with the introduction of legislation like the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act, the assistance airlines provided to accident survivors and victims families improved dramatically. Later accidents like Alaska Flight 261 off the coast of California, American Flight 1420 in Little Rock, and Swissair Flight 111 off the coast of Nova Scotia displayed a drastically different picture of air disaster family assistance. Rather than horror stories from relatives as in past cases, family members themselves, though grieving, took time to thank the airlines for their compassionate, delicate, and well-thought-out response.

By-and-large most airlines have effectively made the improvements necessary to properly do what is right when air disasters occur. By utilizing outside experts, creating specialized full-time “emergency planning” departments in house, sharing valuable lessons with other carriers, and learning from accident victims families themselves, airlines have implemented a system that has shown itself to be as close to the system safety advocates would like as can be expected in the short time since this rapid evolution in family assistance response began.
Introduction

As more and more Americans take to the skies each year, it seems airlines have evolved from a luxury affair a half-century ago to what seems more like modern day mass transit. The way in which the passenger aviation industry responds to accidents has evolved much the same way. This is due in large part to the rapid growth in attention paid to large-scale disasters and the role that families, advocacy groups, media, and legislators play in the field. Society in general has become more interested in the way in which companies treat their customers in the worst of situations, and this interest has understandably extended to airlines.¹

Former National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chairman Jim Hall told the International Symposium on Family and Victim Assistance for Transportation Disasters in 1998, “What should be obvious, is that this is not a static process. Rather it is continually evolving as we all learn more through our experiences.”² As a leader in what became the movement toward improved family assistance in the mid 1990s, Chairman Hall was speaking from substantial first-hand experience.

Past Accidents

The Chairman learned first-hand about the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988 that left 270 people dead, and the airline’s response to it, from victims’ family members. Chairman Hall also became very involved in the family assistance improvement effort of the families of the 230 people killed in the July 1996 explosion of TWA Flight 800 off the New York coast. Yet a handful of accidents long past were not handled nearly as poorly as the majority. Accidents like the 1985 crash of Delta Flight 191 in Dallas led to several letters by family members commending Delta and others involved for their response.³ Chairman Hall, among other advocates, knew that family assistance needed to quickly evolve and be brought up to and beyond the standard that was employed in the long-forgotten Delta crash that received little negative publicity for its response. Since the enactment of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 following Pan Am 103, TWA 800 and other poorly handled crashes, accidents like American 1420 in Little Rock, Arkansas and Alaska 261 off the
California coast have led the way in providing models for how air disaster responses should be handled by airlines.

Evolution of Airline Family Assistance

The past decade has seen an evolution in the way families are treated after an accident. Virtually all sides of an emergency response have considerably altered the way they operate in response to what has been learned from past accidents, particularly airlines. But even as significant learning has taken place, most accidents (including those cited in this paper as models) lead to substantial aggravations for families in the legal process that naturally follows the crash. The issues that center on the litigation in response to aviation disasters are not included in this paper. The intent is to focus on the near-term emergency response of the airline to the families, not long-term legal battles that are often heavily influenced by the carrier’s insurance company and, in many ways, the carriers have little control over.

Intent and Scope of This Paper

The ensuing legal battles are not the only aspect of the disaster response in which the airlines’ control is limited. It is very difficult to compare one accident to another because of the number of uncontrollable variables involved, including the history and perception of the involved airline, the scene location, the cause of the accident, outside and government agencies’ influence, and many other factors. Joe Des Plaines of Family Enterprises Inc., which responded to assist families after the October 1999 Egypt Air crash off the coast of Massachusetts, and is the employee-assistance provider for the NTSB, gives a special view on the comparison of accidents. “If you’ve seen one accident, you’ve seen one accident,” Mr. Des Plaines tells those he shares his experiences with. Likewise, Sue Warner-Bean, Alaska Airlines Director of Emergency Response adds, “each accident is a case study in itself.” Because the topic of family assistance to air disasters is an extremely emotional one, human crisis and emotion are areas that those who respond to the crashes must attempt to understand. As such, this report includes a few examples of the emotional response that plane crashes generate, including a song, poetry, and several emotional writings.
With factors that make accident comparisons difficult in mind, the intent of this paper is to describe the history and trends in family assistance rather than to directly compare one accident to another. While some accidents will be cited as a learning experience in which the treatment of families was not optimal and other accidents are described as industry models, this polar analysis is done to identify specific ways that the opportunity to extend compassion and a helping hand was or was not maximized by the airline involved. Additionally, while an airline’s response to an accident involving one of their aircraft takes on a fairly large scope, from investigation to public relations, my focus will be squarely on the role and methods employed by the airline in terms of family assistance.

**Background on This Report**

In gathering and analyzing information for inclusion in this report, I interviewed various experts in the field of aviation disaster emergency response. From officials with the federal government to family members of those who have been killed in air disasters, as well as leading airline representatives who have led the response to recent accidents, each provided a special insight into the trends in the field. Research was done on the Internet and through safety-advocacy organizations, books, letters, congressional hearings, speeches, laws, and meeting minutes to provide a well-rounded view.

**Background on Internship**

This research paper is the academic culmination of a six-month internship with the Emergency Planning and Response department of a major airline. As part of my internship, I participated in training for the HpEART volunteers (mentioned later in this report using their more widely used title of “CARE Team” or “family escort”), and met with many emergency response professionals from various airlines, vendors, and trainers. I also conducted the “manifest reconciliation” drills that are the heart of accurate passenger identification in the event of an accident. During one drill in particular the process for recording an infant being onboard the aircraft was questioned and as a result of my drill, a new system for infant logging is being developed. I developed a new
database system to better update and utilize the personal contact information that will be critical in the event of a HpEART team call-out to a major accident, and developed several editions of a newsletter that is circulated to the 500+ members of the employee-based volunteer team that will assist family members of accidents victims should they ever be needed. I also participated in the making of an emergency response team recruitment campaign and a new emergency response training video that will be shown to virtually all airport employees.

This report reflects the things I have learned personally in my time with the department whose function is solely to prepare to effectively, compassionately, and responsibly handle a major air disaster, should one ever occur, combined with the personal research undertaken to learn more about past accidents, trends, and the future of airline family assistance.
History of Family Assistance

On April 15, 1926, Charles Lindbergh left Chicago in a DeHavilland biplane, bound for St. Louis with a single bag of mail. That was the first regularly scheduled flight of what would become American Airlines in 1934, and with the acquisition of TWA this year, would go on to be the oldest passenger airline still operating today. In those early days of air travel, accidents occurred less often than they do today based on sheer numbers, but relative to the number of flights and miles traveled, occurred far more often than today. And when those accidents did occur, they were handled much differently than recent accidents. In fact, aviation disasters in the early part of the 20th century were treated as a sort of “hush up deal.”

“Public affairs people had a good relationship with the media,” Erik Grosof, NTSB Family Affairs Manager says. “The normal procedure was to bury the news. It was just the nature of the industry.” One of the first major aviation disasters, a 1956 collision between a United and a TWA plane over the Grand Canyon, left 128 people dead. Although the media reported the crash, little was heard about the accident or its ramifications just a few days later. This type of “tell and forget” reporting was not limited to accidents in remote parts of the country. Just four years later, aircraft from the same two airlines collided over Staten Island, New York, this time killing 134 people, with little coverage or follow-up by the news, the public, or any government oversight agency. In the following four decades, Americans’ interest in aviation safety, and in particular, the “family assistance” response of airlines would change drastically.

On April 1, 1967, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) began operation. Legislative action by Congress handed the independent Federal agency the task of investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States, including determining probable cause and issuing safety recommendations to prevent future accidents. Since its inception, the Safety Board’s personnel, on call 24 hours a day to respond immediately to an accident site, have investigated more than 110,000 aviation accidents. As a result, the NTSB has become one of the most experienced aviation accident investigation agencies.
1980s – Little or No Assistance

Up through the 1980s, airlines provided very little in the way of assistance to the families of accident victims. In fact in many instances discussed later in this report, airlines did things that made dealing with the grief of losing a loved one much more difficult. In the case of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland, which killed 270 people, the airline’s response to the disaster “had huge issues, but the snowball (of public scrutiny) had not begun to roll yet”. The families of the victims were outraged, like Susan and Daniel Cohen, whose daughter was killed in the explosion, and took on a new mission in life to put Pan Am out of business. Poor handling of accidents was not unique to Pan Am.

By default, random airline employees had become resident experts in the field of accident response simply because they were chosen to go. They had received no formal training, and instead created a perpetual problem by teaching themselves as they went. Because none did any extensive formal debriefings, they were unable to discover critical mistakes in the way they handled the accident investigation and victims’ families, and as a result failed to learn from their mistakes.¹

Yet there were some exceptions to the rule that airlines lacked appropriate dedication to assisting family members of those killed in crashes. After the July 1989 crash of a United Airlines DC-10 in Sioux City, Iowa that killed 111 of those onboard, the airline received very little negative publicity for its response. In response to the 1985 Delta Airlines L-1011 that crashed near Dallas, Wallace Dill, the father of one of the 135 people killed, wrote an emotional letter printed on the front page of the Times Herald thanking the city and the airline for their gracious help. In it he writes, “Here was a disaster of awesome proportions where one would assume that panic and chaos would rule supreme. I saw no panic and I saw no chaos. I did see hundreds of volunteers... all answering a call that was never a command.” Mr. Dill gives extensive praise to Keith Stokes, a Delta employee who was part of what would later become known in the industry as a CARE Team, and who was assigned to help the Dills at each step of the tragic process.³ But far from the rule, accounts of treatment by the airline and government agencies involved in the accident like Mr. Dill’s were rare.
1990s – Limited Family Assistance

After continuing complaints from family involved in a string of poorly handled accidents, the chairman of the NTSB began to weigh in on the topic and lend his support to those fighting for better responses from all sides involved in aviation disasters. In September 1994, 132 people died when a US Air 737 crashed outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the city that would later become the home of aviation emergency response advocacy group National Air Disaster Alliance/Foundation. On May 11, 1996, a Valujet DC-9 crashed in the Florida Everglades, killing all 110 people onboard. In these accidents, families made repeated complaints about the way in which they were treated, and the media and public began to pay closer attention. But perhaps the catalyst in the recent move toward far greater support of accident victims’ families was the crash of TWA Flight 800. On July 17, 1996, a TWA Boeing 747-200 exploded in mid-air over the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of East Moriches, New York, sparking the largest aviation disaster investigation in the history of commercial flight. Within weeks of this disaster, NTSB Chairman Jim Hall called a major meeting of families, airlines, and representatives of several government agencies that would later lead to a massive overhaul of aviation disaster response in the United States.

During the 1998 International Symposium on Family & Victim Assistance for Transportation Disasters held in Arlington, Virginia, Chairman Hall shared some of the stories he heard from families during that meeting.

“Shortly after becoming NTSB Chairman in 1994, I became personally aware of the need for (family) assistance. During an aviation accident public hearing I chaired, numerous family members related their experiences to me. They told me of continuous busy signals from the airline’s 800 accident information number, lack of information, untimely notification, misidentified remains, personal effects being mishandled, unidentified remains not being handled with dignity, and the use of confidential information obtained during the grieving process in the litigation that inevitably followed. In short, at a time when they most needed guidance, assistance, and compassion, they felt abandoned and, in some cases, abused. Later, after a meeting with family members from nine different aviation accidents and various industry representatives during two groundbreaking sessions, I learned that these feelings were not unique; they were shared by family members from almost every other accident. This sad truth was further confirmed during a public meeting of the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security, when I and the
other commissioners heard story after tragic story from family members. I want to share two of them with you.”

The chairman went on to tell of the 18-hours the sister of a passenger onboard American Eagle Flight 4184, an ATR-72 that crashed in Roselawn, IN, spent on hold and getting busy signals from the airline’s special “emergency assistance” telephone number. Two weeks after the accident, American told her it would be four to six weeks before she could get the remains of her sister. Two days later, the airline called back to say she would have the remains within 24 hours. After the funeral, she repeatedly called American for information on the personal belongings her sister had on board the aircraft. With only promises that the remains returned to her were those of her sister, the woman also wanted to know how the victim was identified. After months of being told the belongings would “come soon,” the family discovered that the majority of the victim’s belongings were incinerated during the second week of recovery operations. Sadly, they also learned that airline representatives had authorized a nighttime mass burial of much of the unidentified human remains, without the knowledge or consent of families. Until this was revealed, the airline did not plan to tell families, hold any type of service, or even mark the grave.

A similar event reportedly took place after the US Air crash outside Pittsburgh. According to families who later testified before Congress, 38 caskets of unidentified human remains were buried without their knowledge the day before a special service was held where only two caskets containing unidentified remains were shown. At the time, an airline spokesperson said family members weren’t told of the other 38 caskets until they asked because the company thought the knowledge would be “too distressing.” Six months later, relatives from the same crash say they found some of their loved ones’ belongings in a trash bin outside the hangar where the wreckage of the plane was stored. The belongings, which included rings, watches, planners, address books, and wallets, were in poor condition after sitting in the mud in the dumpster for half a year.

While the airlines involved in the stories above did have limited family assistance programs, much of the actions of the airline served to harm, not help, families. TWA, for example, had a TRAUMA (family assistance) team in place, but were several days late in beginning care for most families, and the airline made so many other mistakes outside
the scope of the TRAUMA Team. It is important to note, though, that TWA is by no means solely responsible for the problems associated with airline response to accidents like the crash of TWA 800. TWA did have plans for the case of a crash, but the response as a whole, from the airline to the county medical examiner, got off on the wrong foot and went downhill from there.¹ The handling of the accident by other organizations, including federal agencies, could be called as poor if not worse than that of TWA.

What is a Family Assistance Team?
In order to properly respond to an aircraft accident to assist families, friends, victims, and survivors, airlines have created special teams of trained volunteers interested in compassionately caring for and helping to meet the immediate needs of grieving relatives. Sometimes referred to by the more generic term “escorts,” members of Family Assistance Teams (which have different names in different airlines), are deployed as part of the initial response of the airline to the accident. In many airlines, the team has the full authority needed from the company to quickly respond to virtually any need they see an accident family member has. From arranging transportation to the accident site, child care, and errands, to paying all expenses of the family while in the city where the accident occurred and helping quickly gather information on the family’s behalf, team members seek to remove stressful externalities from the event and allow the family members the privacy they need to grieve.

Examples of Poorly Handled Accident Responses
In order to gain a proper understanding of specific instances where families of accident victims most felt their needs were not met, responses to several past crashes have been analyzed. The intent is not to compare one accident to another, but rather to discover specific traits of accident responses that airlines and other agencies have learned from as family assistance to air disasters has progressed. One of the earliest accidents to offer airlines and others evidence of the need for improvement in emergency planning was Pan Am Flight 103.
Pan Am Flight 103
At 6:56 P.M. on December 21, 1988, shortly after leaving London's Heathrow airport and leveling off at 31,000 feet, Pan Am World Airways Flight 103 bound for New York's JFK airport disappeared from radar screens. Detonation of an explosive device placed in the cargo area of the Boeing 747 named 'Maid of the Seas' caused it to break apart, with two main sections of wreckage falling to the town of Lockerbie, Scotland below. Eleven people on the ground were killed by fire and falling debris, in addition to all 259 passengers and crew.\(^8\)

![The cockpit section of Pan Am Flight 103. (December 21, 1988)](http://www.planecrashinfo.com/w881221.htm)

Some time later, thousands of family members of people believed to be onboard the aircraft began calling Pan Am for any information. During the hours and hours grieving friends and relatives spent on hold, they listened to, among other things, the Christmas song “I'll Be Home for Christmas.” So started the first major aviation accident to receive poor publicity for its handling by the involved airline. Although families whose loved ones were killed in the explosion complained bitterly of their treatment by Pan Am Airways, not the least of which was insensitive recordings during exhausting hold times, the “the snowball (of public scrutiny) had not begun to roll yet.”\(^1\)
Once able to reach a Pan Am representative, many of the family members in the New York area were told they could get more information from representatives in the JFK airport terminal. Once many friends and relatives had gathered in the terminal amongst hoards of TV cameras and newspaper photographers, a spokesperson told them there were no survivors, as cameras rolled. Many were appalled at the pictures they saw on the news that evening.¹

In a 1996 report to Congress, members of the NTSB also cited crass and impersonal messages left on the answering machines of those unable to get to JFK airport. “This is Pan Am calling. Your daughter Diane was on Pan Am Flight 103. The plane went down over Scotland. There were no survivors. If you have any questions you may call us,” one taped message said.¹⁰

Weeks later when human remains arrived home, no Pan Am representatives were present for their delivery. Family members watched in horror as a forklift scooped up and lowered their loved ones from the aircraft that carried them. Today, remains will be carefully lowered on a belt loader and placed in a hearse with dignity, and only after the entire process has been gently explained to the families. Airlines have since learned that most family members acknowledge the process that needs to take place, and simply want it to be thoughtfully explained to them beforehand. Friends and relatives want information on their loved ones and the entire process that is unfolding as quickly and accurately as possible.¹

In 1998, relatives participated in a memorial ceremony conducted at Arlington Cemetery marking the ten-year anniversary of the crash. At the park’s visitor center, the group boarded a bus for the trip up to the hill where the Scottish cairn, a memorial to their loved ones, was erected. About halfway up, the bus was stopped by an Army soldier who boarded and briefed the emotional families about proper decorum in the cemetery, like remembering not to drop cigarette butts. Clearly, the young man had no clue who he was addressing, thinking it was another load of tourists. Later, the families expressed astonishment at his insensitivity. The organizers of the service, working on behalf of the former Pan Am World Airways, along with all other airlines, learned a valuable lesson. Make sure everyone who has any chance of coming in contact with family has been
briefed beforehand. When the ceremony opened with two minutes of silence, signifying the time it took the plane to fall from the sky, they learned another lesson. The “silence” was filled with camera shutters from the crowds of media near the family. According to the family, the media’s insensitivity was annoying and demeaning. Airlines are now aware of the need to ban photography during moments of silence.¹¹

While these issues may seem petty to some who are inexperienced with grief, they are only a handful of the issues described by the parents of a girl killed in the Pan Am 103 crash, Susan and Daniel Cohen, in the book they wrote following the accident. They write of their new mission in life. First, to see the Libyans responsible go to trial. And second only to that, to put Pan Am World Airways out of business in retaliation for their poor response. The Cohens celebrated in December 1991, when Pan Am CEO Thomas Plaskett announced they were filing for bankruptcy.¹²

Though perhaps the first to receive significant attention, Pan Am World Airways’ response to the accident was by no means unique.
Valujet Flight 592

At 2:15 in the afternoon May 11, 1996, 110 people boarded a Valujet DC-9 in Miami, bound for Atlanta, Georgia. Shortly after takeoff, the crew reported a fire, and smoke began to fill the interior of the aircraft. Outdated, improperly labeled oxygen cylinders lacking their safety caps ignited, causing an uncontrollable fire in the forward cargo hold. Candalyn Kubeck, the first American female commercial airline captain to die in a crash, along with all 109 others on board, were killed when the plane crashed in a remote part of the Florida Everglades 18 miles northwest of the Miami airport.\(^8\)

“It’s an unrelenting, horrifying, cutting edge kind of pain. And it leaves an empty space that never gets filled,” Susan Smith, the mother of a Valujet victim said. Aside from grief, nearly all family members share anger, at Valujet for how the accident was handled and at SabreTech for mishandling and mislabeling the oxygen canisters that caused the crash. Marilyn Chamberlin, mother of Flight 592 Captain Candalyn Kubeck, hoped something positive would come of her daughter’s death. She may have gotten her wish, with the passage of new legislation, and enhanced safety & respond plans, after countless letters to members of Congress, the FAA, and the NTSB. “It’s been pure hell – undoubtedly the worst year of my life. I’ve never known such depression, such grief,” Kubeck said. Yet she was angry enough to work to fix it.
During a 1996 hearing before Congress, families from the Valujet 592 crash, including Kubeck, told legislators of overzealous attorneys in Florida that relentlessly pursued grieving relatives. Lawyers repeatedly handed out business cards and tried to initiate consultations with victims in hotel lobbies and at a memorial service at the Everglades crash site. Some relatives went so far as to request an injunction against the lawyers. While this type of activity was not endorsed by Valujet, and the law arguably still does not require the airline to protect families from it, most would agree that the airline had an obligation to protect grieving relatives as best they could, and they failed to do that.

TWA Flight 800

Initial radio report to Boston Center air traffic control:

507: “We just saw an explosion up ahead of us here, about 15,000 feet or something like that. It just went down… into the water!”
Controller: “507, you report an explosion, is that correct sir?”
507: “Yes sir, about 5 miles out, my 11 O’Clock here”
Virgin 009: “Ahh, Virgin 009, I can confirm, it was out of my 9 o’clock position, we just had an explosion out there, about 5 miles, 5 or 6 miles away.”
Controller: “Virgin 009 I’m sorry, say again?”
Virgin 009: “Ahh, the 9 o’clock position sir, it looked like an explosion of some sort, about maybe 6 miles out.”
Controller: “An explosion 6 miles out from your 9 o’clock position, thank you very much sir.”
65A: “Center, 65 Alpha, we are directly over the site where that airplane, or whatever it was, just exploded and went into the water. It’s at 19 miles on the 236 radial from Hamden.”
Controller: “Roger that, thank you very much sir, we’re investigating that right now. TWA 800, center?”
Controller: “TWA 800, center.”
Controller: “TWA 800, T-W-A Eight-Zero-Zero, if you hear center, ident (identify).”
(Controller handles directions to other aircraft)
Controller: “TWA 800, center.”
Unknown: “I think that was him.”
Controller: “I think so.”
Unknown: “God bless them.”
On July 17, 1996 TWA Flight 800 left New York’s JFK airport for Paris, France. Carrying an unusually large number of high school and college age students leaving for summer trips in Europe, the 747 exploded at 13,000 feet, broke apart, and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island, New York. After a lengthy investigation by the NTSB and FBI that originally centered on terrorism, the NTSB determined that an explosion as a result of the flammable fuel/air mixture in the center fuel tank caused the accident. The ignition source for that explosion has not been determined with certainty, but one of two possible causes is likely. Perhaps a short circuit in the mass of wires associated with the fuel quantity indication system just outside the fuel tank allowed excessive voltage to enter the tank and create a spark. The other possibility involves the main air conditioning unit, which is located directly underneath the center fuel tank and was running constantly as the plane sat for an extended period of time on the taxiway on the hot summer day. Since much of the heat released from that air conditioning unit is directed upward into the bottom of the metal fuel tank, some believe it is possible that excessive heat and exhaust allowed the fumes inside the tank to reach a sufficient combustion temperature.
TWA had plans in place for their response to an accident. But those plans failed to properly meet the needs of the victims that would begin their quest to know more about the status of their loved ones, what had happened, and how to proceed. The response to the crash from all sides, including the airline and responsible government agencies, “got off on the wrong foot, and went downhill from there,” according to Erik Grosof of the NTSB. Responsibility for the vast problems that plagued the response to the crash as the situation progressed was by no means limited to the airline.

Complicating the identification process was the Suffolk County, NY medical examiner’s decision to refuse assistance from the federal government. Dr. Charles Wetli’s work could have been supported by medical examiners, coroners, and funeral directors who would have responded to assist in the massive process. Instead, the first signs of a “turf war” between local and federal agencies had been sent. Since the accident, Dr. Wetli changed his view on federal help to medical examiners and is now a proponent of “D-Mort”, which stands for Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team.

While the TWA 800 incident as a whole cannot be attributed as the cause of the legislation that soon followed, many would conclude that it was the “straw that broke the camel’s back.” In its report to the full House, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure reported, “interest in this issue was heightened by the recent TWA disaster.”

**Outside Complications**

Another apparent “turf war” also developed, this one between the FBI and NTSB, complicating the response and investigation. Each agency held different views on procedure and authority and had drastic differences in the resources available to them. The FBI made the quick decision to pursue the investigation as a criminal probe, a decision that had major implications on guiding the rest of the response and investigation. Within 24 hours of the crash, it was clear the FBI, not NTSB, had taken charge. The FBI already had more agents on the scene than the NTSB had staff nationwide and had deployed equipment and resources NTSB personnel could only dream of.
After complaining his agency was being “squeezed out” to the FBI, NTSB Vice Chairman Robert Francis became extremely close to James Kalstrom, the head of the FBI’s New York field office, in participating in the investigation. That upset many NTSB executives who claimed Francis was disregarding some of the Safety Board’s most fundamental philosophies, like making prompt public announcements as soon as new information is confirmed.13

In many cases, the NTSB was limited in their ability to even access information on the crash. NTSB personnel could read FBI interviews, but couldn’t copy them or take any notes from them. They could interview potential witnesses, but only with an FBI agent present. The rules the FBI placed on the course of the investigation caused innumerable problems. Weeks after the plane crashed, NTSB investigators found themselves re-interviewing hundreds of people already interviewed, because the FBI’s interviews had focused squarely on criminal activity and intentionally disregarded any air safety related questions or responses. In one case, the FBI asked no follow-up questions to an airport employee who talked of his “trouble fueling” the plane, so the NTSB had to go back to him.13

These examples of inter-agency conflict explain aspects of several complaints from relatives of those killed in the crash, including multiple interviews and lack of timely information. They also give good evidence of some of the areas where the airline lacked significant control in this portion of the response. But there remained many areas TWA did have control over that were neglected.

**TWA Statements Regarding TWA 800 Family Assistance Response**

In an August 4, 1996 opinion article published in the New York Times, TWA’s then-president and CEO Jeffrey Erickson publicly discusses his company’s response to the crash. In it he shares that when his sleep was interrupted in London with the call that notified him of the crash, “my hands began to shake. Then my thoughts quickly turned to the people – the victims, the families and our people of Trans World Airlines. In the more than two weeks since, we have thought of little else.”14 According to the families involved, this statement can be construed as nothing short of a severe exaggeration.
Mr. Erickson goes on to write “the airline takes care of the families. Some may find this a curious system, but it’s the one with which we must work.” One must question the chief executive’s dedication to caring for and meeting the needs of the victims families when he reports that they care for the families not because they have an obligation to, not because they have an ethical responsibility to, and not because it is the right thing to do. Rather, Erickson points to “the system” as the sole reason TWA had any obligation to the victims of the crash.

Despite the CEO’s remarks that do little to encourage people of TWA’s commitment to victims’ families, many of the companies 600 family assistance team members (called “Trauma Response Team” at TWA) responded to receive families at the airport, and to shelter them from the press and public. Within a few hours, families were moved to the Ramada Plaza Hotel. All this happened outside the view of the media. The idea, Erickson wrote, was to give the families the privacy and confidentiality to let them deal with their grief. He goes on to say he doubts “any CEO has ever been prouder of his people.” Their job was to find out what each family needed and to help them get it. From travel arrangements, help in obtaining paperwork to identify loved ones, clothes, and activities for restless kids, Erickson says TWA did whatever was needed.

In the editorial Erickson admits, “it was not a perfect process... Could we have done a quicker job of finalizing the passenger manifest, contacting each family and releasing names? Perhaps. But in response to those who criticized us in this area, I have to note that T.W.A. accomplished this grim notification task in about 23 hours – as fast or faster than almost any other airline in similar tragic circumstances in the last 10 years.” With accidents like Valujet and Pan Am (both in the prior 10 years) still fresh in the minds of the growing number of airline-response advocates, one must question whether his last response is worth mentioning to anyone who might have knowledge of past accidents within his timeline.

“There certainly are changes that could smooth the process for the families. One possibility would be to require each passenger to provide an emergency notification telephone number to the airline,” he continued. But in addressing the possibility of a requirement to provide an emergency number, Erickson fails to mention that airlines don’t even ask for an emergency contact with a reservation, much less require one.
The CEO closes his editorial by saying he believes that his people were successful in comforting the families, and “making it a little easier to bear their burden... I believe it because I have seen so many employees welcomed into the families they comforted. I believe it because so many of the family members have told me it is so.” None of the people I interviewed, including family involved in the TWA 800 accident, had anything negative to say about the company employees responsible for caring for them. But while they believe the specific employees were sincere and did their best, the following accounts question the sincerity of the company’s top management and decision-making, and also notes that for most, the care they received was very late in coming.

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<th>Experiences of a TWA 800 Family Member</th>
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<td>Frank Carven, testifying before Congress on his experience with the TWA800 disaster.</td>
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Associated Press photo

The view of the airline’s response from CEO Jeffrey Erickson can be contrasted with that of Frank Carven III, the Harford County, Maryland County Attorney who lost his sister and nephew in the crash of TWA 800. Mr. Carven, the then Director & Vice President of The Families of TWA Flight 800 Association, sat on a task force operated by the U.S. Department of Transportation and the NTSB. The task force met for 18 months to implement the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996.

Mr. Carven says by 8:30 P.M., just a short time after the explosion, TWA publicized a toll-free number for families to call. He began calling right away, as did his mother and brothers. They spent five agonizing hours listening to busy signals, and at 1:00 the next
morning finally got through. Mr. Carven says rather than providing information, TWA began asking him for all kinds of information on his relatives. He asked the call-taker, among other things, if there was any place they could go and if any travel arrangements could be made to quickly get them to New York to learn more. To everything he asked he was told “I don’t know” and that someone would call him back when they had more information. They never did. After a sleepless night waiting for the promised call from the airline and only busy signals persisting with his attempts to call TWA back, Mr. Carven left late in the morning on his own, bound for New York. Though the airline had not told him he’d need them, Mr. Carven’s legal background told him he would need X-Rays and dental records for a proper identification to be made.\textsuperscript{15}

As his frustration with the lack of communication from TWA grew, Mr. Carven placed a call to the office of New York Governor George Pataki. Personnel at the Governor’s office were able to quickly share family hotel and assistance center information. Not realizing they would be in New York for a month and getting no help from the airline, the Carvens had packed very light and had virtually nothing with them. But their lack of resources was minimal compared with families from France, Israel, and other foreign countries. The airline had not told them they would need medical records for a positive identification of their loved ones to be completed. Many of them flew to New York without necessary records. As complex as it can be to obtain records in some foreign countries, much less when the next of kin has traveled thousand of miles away, this only added to the logistical problems these relatives would face, and delayed identification for many of them. “No one wants to say it, but airlines need to mention to bring medical records on their first call,” Mr. Carven says.\textsuperscript{15}

At 5:00 P.M. the day after the crash, local police, not TWA representatives, confirmed that Frank Carven’s sister and nephew were in fact on the plane that exploded. That night, Mr. Carven says, the NTSB, not TWA, set up more permanent housing plans for the family members who were now flooding to the area in increasing numbers. And contrary to TWA CEO Jeffrey Erickson’s comments with regard to how well their escorts did at “making it a little easier to bear their burden,” Mr. Carven says it was Saturday, three days after the crash occurred, before his family had a TWA representative assigned to them. At that time, though, the airline assigned three escorts to his family, more and more of whom had come to New York to be close to the ongoing investigation.
And Mr. Carven made sure to reiterate that their family had no problems at all with the escorts, once assigned. In fact, as CEO Erickson reported, Mr. Carven says the escorts are very close to his family to this day. While he believes they did their very best, and were a great help once assigned, they were very late in coming. Three days after the accident, much of the most difficult questions were already being asked, and the family had already begun to deal with many of their own needs.\textsuperscript{15}

But the family would also have difficulty with some costs after the fact. About a thousand people attended a reception after the funeral held for Frank Carven’s sister a nephew. As was the normal process, the funeral director submitted the bill to TWA. The airline sent a letter back disallowing $700 for alcohol at the funeral reception.

Shortly thereafter, Jeffrey Erickson, the president of the airline, wrote a letter to the Carven family, among others. He wrote “terminated employee’s families can fly on TWA using the employee’s flight benefits for 30 days after the employee’s termination.” But as if a gift, the president said in this case family members would be “given” nine months of employee flight benefits, rather than the usual 30 days for terminated employees. The families were astonished at the president’s insensitivity. Their loved ones were killed, not terminated as employees.\textsuperscript{15}

Travel problems persisted beyond the nine months the airline offered families. A memorial to the victims of the explosion was erected on Long Island, and it was there that relatives held a one-year anniversary memorial service. Though Boeing gave $100,000 to help create the monument, TWA had failed to contribute. The families expected they could at least receive help with travel to the memorial service from the airline.\textsuperscript{15}

To their amazement, this expectation would develop into intense negotiations between the company and the family group, when TWA refused to fly anyone to the memorial service. As negotiations progressed, the airline agreed to transport three members of each family. After more negotiations and the families’ threats that they would share TWA’s lack of cooperation one year later with the media, the company finally agreed to transport all family members to attend the service for their loved ones. But even that would be only after every passenger was made to sign a special release, in case the
plane crashed. “It was like a full day of negotiations in New York, like an intense labor negotiation battle,” Mr. Carven said. “We were not asking for the world, just transportation.” 15

I asked Mr. Carven whether he believed that the fact that his relatives were traveling “non-rev,” that is using their complimentary travel benefits, or the fact that they were company employees, had any bearing on their treatment by the airline, either positive or negative. The sincere and straight-forward nature of his response caught me by surprise when he said, “no, they were consistently terrible to everybody.” 15

**Final Thoughts on TWA 800**

In the words of Frank Carven, “the initial response of the airline can make it or break it. Had TWA responded appropriately, they wouldn’t be in the position they are today. The quarter before 800 went down was the first quarter with a profit in years. Now they’re bankrupt. I can’t help but think that’s partly because of the publicity their response earned them.” 15

It is important to remember that at the time TWA 800 went down, the laws regarding the obligations of airlines that we have now were not in place. TWA, like the airlines that suffered disasters before them, did not realize so many of the issues carriers are now aware are critical. Prior to the crash, the emphasis many Americans now have on proper family assistance simply was not there. Until 1996, society had not demanded much more of airlines that what TWA provided. And TWA is not solely responsible for the poor response.

Much of the blame lies with the local and federal government agencies and the inability of investigators to access and properly release information to the public and, in particular the families. TWA was only a part of the problems that plagued the accident from the outset. And just days after the explosion of Flight 800, relatives decided to form an association to fight for improvements in family assistance in air disasters. 16
Legislation – 3 pages

The airline response to the crash of Pan Am 103 in Scotland, US Air 132 outside Pittsburgh, and Valujet 592 near Miami, Florida provided necessary fuel to build the move toward legislation regarding family assistance in aviation disasters. And the explosion of TWA 800 provided the final push necessary to energize Americans and their Congressional representatives to take action.¹

The overall cause of the movement toward legislation is like a change in society. As Erik Grosof of the NTSB says, “people expect more.” The Discovery Channel better educates people on things like past accidents, for example. Today, word of how things are handled gets around.

But legislation needed more than ordinary individuals to devise a plan for how accident responses should be handled. Grosof compares the need for expert analysis and learning from past accidents with the old adage of salt and pepper. When dinner is served, often only the cook knows not the food didn’t have enough salt or pepper, not the guest. Likewise, family assistance and aviation emergency planning requires full-time experts focusing on improvements, better training, and adequately responding, not learning as they go and assuming everything will fall into place when the time comes like the earliest days of accident response.

In the 21st century, a meeting between the NTSB and the airline will follow 30 to 45 days after a crash. The objective is not a one-way performance review or critique, but a two-way dialogue intended to seek ways the next response, whether by that airline or another, can be improved. But accident response developed to this level only after significant lobbying, legislation, and repeated major mistakes by some airlines. Since Pan Am 103, associations of crash victims’ families fighting for more rights and better handling of disasters became a larger and larger presence, increasing in scope and lobbying power with each accident.¹⁶

In 1995, then-Secretary of Transportation Frederico Peña called a meeting of crash victims, family representatives, airlines, and several government agencies. Among those at the meeting was Erik Grosof, interviewed for this report. The intent of the meeting was to discuss aviation disaster family assistance and how to improve it. It was through this
meeting that rumblings of legislation began. But the meeting also provided all sides an opportunity to realize that some middle ground must be established.\textsuperscript{10}

Family members wanted airlines to have hundreds of people waiting to answer accident information phone lines alone, and nothing else. Airlines wanted many hours to reconcile their manifest to verify who boarded the aircraft. Most of those involved in the process realized there would have to be a happy medium between the most extreme demands expressed at the meeting.\textsuperscript{10}

But many realized some of the ignorance each side had as well, and future legislation had to be crafted to help alleviate this, as well. For example, representatives of some airlines said their employees never gave any expression of sorrow for the crash because they thought it would add significantly to their liability. The truth was, it wouldn’t, but future legislation would make that even clearer.\textsuperscript{10} With story after story from accident victims, it was clear that changes needed to take place in accident response. But required changes were not limited to airlines. Improvement in the federal governments plans, authority, and priorities need to be updated as well.

What is currently required? Current Laws.

**Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996**

The October 1996 passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act served as a sweeping guide of new requirements for airlines, the NTSB, and others involved in plane crashes. Each of the following is in response to a specific complaint or problem discovered in analyzing past accidents. They include:\textsuperscript{17}

- NTSB chairman shall quickly publicize name & phone number of a director of family support services (member of the Board) who will act as a point of contact with the federal government for the families of the passengers, and a liaison between the air carrier and the government.
- NTSB will designate an experienced independent non-profit organization (Red Cross) to have responsibility for emotional care and support of the families. Specific responsibilities include mental health & counseling services, in coordination with the disaster response team of the airline; provide a private place for families to grieve; meet with families, contact all affected family members periodically thereafter until such time as assistance no longer needed. Organization shall communicate with families as to the roles of the organization, government agencies, air carrier, and arrange a suitable memorial service, in consultation with the board.
- Safety Board to have primary federal responsibility for fatal recovery & ID
- NTSB to request passenger manifest from airline, as up-to-date as possible at time of request.
- NTSB to ensure families are briefed prior to any public briefing
• NTSB to ensure families are informed individually and allowed to attend any public hearings and meetings of the Board about the accident.
• Red Cross is to coordinate with the airline to use the airline’s resources, as much as possible, to carry out responsibilities of transportation, family assistance, etc.
• Prohibit anyone from impeding NTSB family assistance work; prohibit anyone (including government agencies) from keeping families from communicating with each other.
• Forty-five days must pass before lawyers can seek families to become clients
• Airlines must submit to the NTSB a plan for addressing the needs of victims families. The plan must include:
  o Plan for publicizing a reliable, toll-free phone #, and for providing sufficient staff to handle calls from family members.
  o Process for notifying families before providing any public notice of the names of passengers, and as soon as confirmation that a passenger was on board is received, using only suitably trained individuals for notification.
  o Give immediate passenger list to NTSB and Red Cross, confirmed or not, when asked.
  o Contact family about disposition of all remains & personal effects
  o Return any possession of the passenger that the family wants, regardless of condition, unless needed for investigation.
  o Unclaimed possessions must be held by airline for 18 months.
  o The air carrier must consult the family of each passenger about the construction of any monument to the passengers, including any inscription.
  o Treatment of non-revenue passengers and revenue-paying passengers will be same
  o Work with Red Cross to assure families receive any needed ongoing care
  o Airline must provide reasonable compensation to assistance organizations involved
  o Assist family in traveling to the accident location and provide for the physical care of the families while they are there
  o 49 U.S.C. 44909 requires air carrier to provide the passenger manifest to the Secretary of State within 3 hours of notification of a disaster outside U.S.
• Air carrier shall not be liable for damages in any action brought in court with regard to air carrier preparing manifest list, unless grossly negligent.
• NTSB to establish task force, in cooperation with FEMA, Red Cross, airlines, and families of past accidents.
  o Task force shall come up with a plan to assist air carriers in responding to accidents.
  o Recommendations to ensure that attorneys and representatives of media do not intrude on the privacy of families.
  o Recommendation on methods to ensure foreign families receive appropriate assistance
  o Ensure state mental health licensing laws do not prevent out-of-state mental health workers from working at site
  o Recommendations on extent to which military facilities could be used to help identify remains
  o Recommendations on how airlines can improve the timeliness of notification to families

As a result of the FBI & NTSB “turf war,” described earlier in this report, the NTSB has been given primary Federal responsibility for attending to the needs of the families of crash victims. Legislation included the necessary support of the NTSB’s efforts to quickly provide families with accurate information as it becomes available.

More recent “Air 21” legislation requires training of airline employees in the family assistance process and more cooperation by airlines with the NTSB on crashes outside the U.S. Although the NTSB does not have jurisdiction over foreign accidents, airlines that provide assistance to families in the United States will be required to do so in cooperation with the NTSB.
Role of NTSB Office of Family Affairs

The role of the National Transportation Safety Board’s Office of Family Affairs includes disseminating information to families, conducting briefings at the accident site at least once a day, providing updates on the investigation to the families, and answering all questions possible from family members. The NTSB will also establish two separate facilities to be used to coordinate the care for families.7

The Family Assistance Center (FAC), which is to be set-up by representatives of the involved airline, will be located at a hotel or other meeting facility. The hotel will be selected with special consideration toward security, quality of rooms, availability of privacy for families, and other matters that will be of interest to the arriving family members. For security issues and to control who has access to grieving family, a badging system will be implemented for admittance into the FAC. The Joint Family Support Operations Center (JFSOC) will be set up in a separate room, and will serve as the focal point for coordination and sharing of information among involved family assistance organizations. Representatives of each federal agency participating will be there, as well as local government emergency service representatives.7

The NTSB will inform the families in the FAC that media have gathered outside, and will help shield families from the media. If family members want to talk to the media, they are free to do so on their own, but the NTSB cannot assist them. The NTSB will also provide a conference call bridge for families who did not come to the scene, for each daily briefing in FAC.7

Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act

Until December 1997, when the Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act was passed, problems persisted in crashes involving foreign airlines, particularly when they occur outside the continental United States. This was the case on August 6, 1997 when Korean Airlines Flight 807 crashed into the mountains on approach to Agana, Guam. The crash of the flight, which originated in Seoul and killed 228 of the 254 people on board, was caused by inoperable equipment at the airport combined with poor flight crew training.8
Korean Airlines did little in the way of response to the crash, which occurred in a United States governed territory and involved a large number of American fatalities. Several crash-specific groups made up of victims’ family members formed in the wake of the disaster and lobbied Congress to better legislate foreign airlines in response to the very poor family assistance on the part of Korean. The result of the groups’ work was the December 1997 passage of the Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act, which holds foreign carriers who fly to the United States to the same family assistance standards as domestic carriers that are described above.

**NTSB Response to New Legislation**

The NTSB is the agency most strengthened by the various legislation recently enacted to better family assistance by airlines. Former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall said the laws “gave the Board the authority it needed to undertake the challenge of bringing together various federal, state, and local government agencies to better serve the victims of transportation accidents and their families. To fulfill the task assigned to us, we created the Office of Family Affairs, with a small five-member staff.” That staff responds to most major accidents within only a few hours notice. The Family Assistance staff also assisted airlines that would accept their help in developing their own plans.7

The NTSB’s Office of Family Affairs also notifies the medical examiner handling an air disaster of the availability of DMORT, a Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team that includes funeral directors and coroners. DMORT members can respond to help expedite the recovery and identification process. To assist with mental health needs, NTSB personnel work with members of the Red Cross to get needed volunteers to the accident site, and also coordinate federal, state, and local emergency management agencies activities with regard to family assistance. The NTSB works closely with many of the family assistance advocacy groups to keep priorities and plans up-to-date.2

**Amendment to Death on the High Seas Act**

In 1920, Congress enacted the Death on the High Seas Act, designed to curb claims by the families of the victims of accidents at sea. The legislation limited claims in response to death at sea to the value of lost wages. In practice, this meant that if the victim was a child or was retired, the family could not receive any compensation.
This law was used by attorneys representing TWA and their insurer after the 1996 crash of Flight 800 off the coast of New York. As a result of difficulties the families faced in their claims filed with TWA because of this law, it was updated on March 8, 2000. The new version allows the families of crashes in excess of 12 miles from shore (the definition of territorial waters) to sue in federal court for loss of care, comfort, and companionship and receive compensation above and beyond lost wages. In the case of an accident within 12 miles of the shoreline, families can sue in state court using applicable state laws, since state jurisdiction is defined out to the 12-mile distance.18

**What is a “Manifest Reconciliation?”**

A manifest reconciliation is the process by which airlines attempt to verify which passengers boarded an aircraft and which may have made reservations and even checked in, but did not board. The process by which this is done varies from airline to airline, ranging from an automated system in which a machine scans boarding cards to a manual system in which a gate agent or other airline employee checks used boarding cards against a reservations list. Once the reconciliation is completed, the airline has verified which boarding passes were actually used to physically board the aircraft, preventing unnecessary notification of the families of anyone who may not have gotten on board.

Several identification issues still remain even after a manifest reconciliation has been completed, and are for the most part out of the control of the airline involved. Upon check-in for a flight, airlines require passengers to show identification. Since most fares do not permit transfer of the reservation from one person to another, it is possible false identification could be used if a passenger tries to use someone else’s ticket. It is also possible the person who held the reservation checked in for their flight, using their ID, and then handed the boarding pass off to a business association or other person who had decided to take the trip for them. In either case, the identity of the person involved in the accident would be “confirmed” as the person whose name was on the reservation and used boarding pass. This error would likely only be corrected to reflect the true identity of the passenger when the person who originally held the reservation steps forward, or when the medical examiner’s identification process is complete.
What to Do, or The “Model”
Alaska 261, American 1420, and Swissair 111

Swissair Flight 111

In one row would be a family with two grown kids, a computer genius son and an attorney daughter, setting out on their hiking holiday to the Bernese Oberland. In another would be a woman whose boyfriend was planning to propose to her when she arrived in Geneva. Sitting here would be a world famous scientist, with his world famous scientist wife.

It began in other cities of the world, with plans hatched at dinner tables or during long-distance calls, plans for time together and saving the world, for corralling AIDS and feeding the famine-stricken and family reunions. What these people held in common at first—these diplomats and scientists and students, these lovers and parents and children—was an elemental feeling, that buzz of excitement derived from holding a ticket to some foreign place. And what distinguished that ticket from billions of other tickets was the simple designation of a number: SR111. 19

Debris from Swissair 111 floats on the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. (September 2, 1998)
Photo: http://www.planecrashinfo.com/w980902.htm

Around 9:30 P.M. on September 2, 1998, the crew of Swissair 111 on a flight from JFK airport in New York to Geneva, Switzerland reported smoke in the cockpit. The McDonnell Douglas MD-11 was diverted to Halifax, Nova Scotia for an emergency landing. A short time later, the aircraft disappeared from radar screens and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia. An investigation revealed that a major fire erupted in the cockpit avionics bay and quickly rendered the plane uncontrollable. All 229 people on board were killed.
Public Views of Swissair 111

As the first major disaster of a foreign air carrier flying to or from the United States since the passage of the Foreign Air Carrier Family Assistance Act, industry observers quickly knew the crash of Swissair Flight 111 would provide the first test of the legislation. Delta Airlines, a partner of Swissair, handled much of the family assistance response, including the assignment of their own CARE team members to assist the families of Americans killed in the accident. Later, Jim Hall would tell the Symposium on Family & Victim Assistance, “Swissair and its code-share partner, Delta, had a plan in place which allowed them to quickly and effectively respond to the needs of the victims’ families. Notification went quickly and family members were provided information as soon as it was available. The airline also tried to anticipate the families’ needs – even offering them $20,000 with no strings attached, to cover immediate expenditures. If you have read the media accounts in the aftermath of this accident, I’m sure you were struck, as I was, by the overwhelmingly positive response of the families to the airlines’ efforts.”

As expected in any accident, there were exceptions to the “overwhelmingly positive response” Chairman Hall spoke of. In a letter printed in the Wall Street Journal, Mark and Barbara Fetherolf expressed anger over Swissair’s handling of the accident and the positive attention it was receiving. Their complaints focused not on the response of Swissair and Delta to assist the families, but instead on the litigation that followed some time later, and was handled not by Delta but Swissair alone. Their own complaint with regard to the handling of the families was the lack of personalization on the letter Swissair gave family members advising them they would be receiving a cash payment, no strings attached, to ease any imminent financial burdens. The letter did not list the name of the specific passenger, but rather was a form letter distributed to the families from the company. The Fetherolfs wrote, “Swissair’s handling of the crash has been as crass and cynical as any corporation faced with a group of victims.” Yet the very reason that letter was sent to the Fetherolfs was because Swissair was offering to make an immediate payment to them, something that rarely occurred in past accidents and was requested by family assistance organizations in earlier meetings between advocates, the NTSB, and airlines.
But many family members, including Jim Hammond, disagreed with the Fetherolfs perception of Delta and Swissair’s response. In the letter he wrote to the Journal, Hammond writes, “I commend you for your article about Swissair and how it has treated families of those killed in the crash. I lost my parents in the disaster. There is no doubt that the pain has been great, and the loss traumatic, and it is also likely that a great deal of negligence by Swissair and others led up to this tragedy. But on a human level, the people of Swissair did their very best to respond to the situation after it happened. The trauma of losing loved ones was not compounded by bureaucratic indifference or needless legalistic indifference.”

**Lessons on Business Impact of Air Disaster Response**

Jeffrey Katz, Swissair’s CEO, said in a prompt statement in response to the crash, “We have an emergency plan, of which communications are a very important part. The basis is to say everything we know as quickly as possible, and only give out the facts.” In the months before the crash, Swissair had trained more than 200 volunteers in family assistance. The effort was part of the plan Swissair submitted to the NTSB in response to the Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act.

In addition to the public view of the family assistance response to Swissair 111, industry observers noted several business implications the disaster had that could have been much different. Richard George of New York based Public Relations Society of America said, “Swissair dealt with this much better than TWA.” They kept communications with the media a priority, second only to caring for the victims. The airline arranged for rapid transportation of family members, police protection, and cash payments. But they also chartered planes for journalists, so they could reach the area. This helped the media quickly gain and share information about the accident, a job the airline took on themselves, knowing the level of access the media had to information would reflect the amount of prompt information the public received.

Other analysts shared Mr. George’s view. Janet Kinzler, European airline analyst at Credit Suisse First Boston in London says that despite inevitable massive litigation claims, “the fact that they handled everything so professionally helped restore consumer and investor confidence.”
Many fundamental management principles are difficult to apply in an irregular emotional crisis like an air disaster. Police and fire departments respond to that type of situation regularly and are used to it, so their management methods have been ironed out and work for them. But airlines must prepare for a crisis of emotions that is neither part of their primary corporate mission nor one often face. The irregular nature of job functions in airline family assistance leads to very big management challenges. But it is necessary that a management structure continue to operate, even if it is very different than the corporate management that normally takes place in the company. In the case of the crash of Alaska Flight 261, “Rank gave way to getting the job done. A vice president became a volunteer typist and made food runs.”22 But this incredible change of job functions allowed those able to assist to make the largest difference, regardless of their title.
Wish You Were Here
Written by: Skip Ewing, Bill Anderson & Debbie Moore

They kissed goodbye at the terminal gate
She said, "You're gonna be late if you don't go"
He held her tight, said, "I'll be alright
I'll call you tonight to let you know"
He bought a postcard, on the front it just said Heaven
With a picture of the ocean and beach
And the simple words he wrote her
Said he loved her and they told her
How he'd hold her if his arms would reach

Wish you were here, wish you could see this place
Wish you were near, I wish I could touch your face
The weather's nice, it's paradise
It's summertime all year and there's some folks we know
They say, "Hello, I miss you so, wish you were here"

She got a call that night but it wasn't from him
It didn't sink in right away, ma'am the plane went down
Our crews have searched the ground
No survivors found she heard him say

But somehow she got a postcard in the mail
That just said Heaven with a picture of the ocean and the beach
And the simple words he wrote her
Said he loves and they told her
How he'd love her if his arms would reach

The weather's nice, in paradise
It's summertime all year and all the folks we know
They say, "Hello, I miss you so, wish you were here"
Wish you were here
Alaska Airlines Flight 261
On January 31, 2000 Alaska Airlines Flight 261, a McDonnell Douglas MD-83 left Puerto Vallarta, Mexico with 88 people bound for San Francisco. At about 4:10 P.M. the flight crew began struggling with a jammed horizontal stabilizer, the vertically rotating wing-like piece that runs horizontally across the aircraft’s tail. Within minutes the crew planned an emergency landing in Los Angeles and began to divert. Within 11 minutes of the start of the struggle with the stabilizer, that aircraft was observed nose down, spinning and tumbling downward through the air. The plane plummeted into the Pacific Ocean off Point Mugu, California, killing everyone aboard.

Flight 261 became the first major domestic all-fatall accident since the passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act (American 1420 occurred earlier). While the crash of Swissair Flight 111 provided a test of the Foreign Air Carriers Family Support Act, Alaska’s incident was the first chance to test the federal response plan for aviation accidents of a domestic nature. As a result of the federal plan, lines of authority were clear, and a good plan based squarely on the lessons learned in past accidents, with help from family members of prior accidents. Overall, the response went well, proving that in large part the new plans and legislation had done what they set out to accomplish. Understanding the relatively new legislation allowed all parties that would deal with the families, particularly the airline, to keep their priorities straight: Families, employees, and then the general public.4

UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden said, “Failure to plan is planning to fail.” Perhaps this mindset is why the extensive plans Alaska and the NTSB had developed by the time the Flight 261 accident occurred proved so instrumental.

Management’s early intent and thoughts
At the time of the Flight 261 accident, Alaska Airlines CARE (Compassionate Assistance Relief Effort) team had 725 members ready for the worst, 300 of whom were deployed to Southern California. The training these members had, coupled with the speed of their response to assist families, clearly paid off. The family of airline employee Sheri Christensen, for example, said they don’t know what they would have done without their CARE team members.
When they arrived in Los Angeles, the Christensens found a team of volunteers from Alaska and Horizon (a subsidiary of Alaska) waiting to do whatever they could to help the grieving family members. Jeff Cacy, an Alaska Vice President and Care Team spokesman, said “We Designed a good program. We just never thought we’d have to use it.” Jeff helped start CARE over a decade ago, telling those who volunteered for the program, “Whatever needs to be done to support the families, that’s what you’re to do.” Jeff Christensen, the victim’s husband, commented, “Alaska Airlines went above and beyond the call of duty. It almost melts my heart, because the Care Team did everything so delicately.”

Delicate, responsible, and effective care seem to emanate from Jeff Cacy’s summation of the mission of the CARE Team as being to locate the family members of those believed to be on board and “say ‘yes’ to everything.” He compared it to “a neighbor coming in and saying, ‘what can I do to help out?’” And the proof can be found not only in the statements of executives and victims alike, but the numbers. Recall that Frank Carven, whose sister and nephew were killed in TWA 800, said it was three days before they had TRAUMA team members assigned to them. But in Alaska’s case, early on Wednesday, February 2nd, less than 36 hours after the plane went down, 260 CARE volunteers had already been assigned to help passengers and were assisting in getting them to Southern California. CARE team members even helped families by arranging childcare. It is a focus on the little things, particularly when done early on, that seems to be most helpful to friends and relatives of those killed.

Alaska President Bill Ayer said, “It used to be that the focus was on the aircraft. But now we realize this is silly. The aircraft is going to be there a long time. Let’s take care of the people.” Alaska’s response also received praise from travel industry observers and business analysts, who noted that the airline acted swiftly and compassionately.

Family & Public Views

Views from company executives, employees, and even industry professionals, while valuable, must correspond to views from those family members directly involved in the crash to be of value. But New Yorker Ruth Ost, whose nephew was killed in 261, agrees
with the assertions of the company’s representatives. Ms. Ost says that despite her grief, she couldn’t be more pleased with the way she and the other families of victims have been treated by Alaska Airlines. “They are quite amazing,” she told USA Today. The same was said by many of the relatives of the 88 people who lost their lives in the accident.25

Much of what Alaska did is mandated by law. But Alaska clearly went further than what was required. CEO John Kelly, for example, reportedly ordered the CARE Team members assigned to each family to provide the relatives “anything they wanted.” Families say the CARE team members met them at airports near their homes within hours of the accident and had all their needs and expenses taken care of while in California to be close to the investigation. As of February 3, when the article was published, a full four days into the response by Alaska, there had been no detectable anger among victims’ relatives. Though it was expected then, as the case is today, that litigation could produce other things, in the families’ most urgent time of grief, things were handled well by the airline.25

Later Management Analysis

The whole process was unusually difficult for Alaska and its employees, especially considering many of those killed in the crash worked for the airline and were members of what Alaska employees describe as a “close knit family.” Yet soon after the response to the accident began to wind down, employees were encouraged to know that they had made a difference, and that it seemed their efforts would serve not as a foundation for further complaints and legislation, but as a model.

John Kelly, CEO of Alaska, wrote to his employees, “Immediately following the accident, CARE teams were dispatched to assist family members and loved ones of passengers and crew. These men and women performed their jobs with courage and compassion under extremely trying circumstances, rising above their own emotion and grief to help others through their time of suffering. Many others, working behind the scenes, helped mobilize our company-wide response program.” He continued with praise for the efforts of his employees and acknowledgement of the positive attention their work had attracted. “For all of that, I thank you. The positive accolades we’ve received from families, friends, the news media, and various agencies involved in this tragedy are a
true testimony to your commitment and caring. You met a tremendous challenge, and should be proud of the way you all responded.  

In the following months, while the litigation process would begin and cause new stresses for those involved in it, the view that Alaska responded compassionately, appropriately, and exceeded what was expected of them remained.

**What did Alaska Airlines Do So Well?**

If the airline response to Alaska Flight 261 serves as a model for airline family assistance, then specific factors that contributed to the success of the operation must be identified. Perhaps most responsible is the core value employees and executives of Alaska Airlines carried into their roles in the accident. According to Alaska, the number one priority for the company and its employees during the crash was caring for the victims’ families.  

Many of the specific things Alaska did that contributed to the positive comments generated regarding their response are listed below.

- Emergency telephone tree quickly deployed to notify all needed parties.
- Crisis Command Center activated to coordinate the airline’s response.
- Executive Emergency Team called in. Company executives responded from wherever they were to lend their support and guidance.
- Executive Accident Teams sent executives to the scene to be straight-forwarded in providing information and stand-up on behalf of the company and its response.
- The CARE Team and a large group of employees representing various aspects of the company immediately left for Los Angeles.
- Company focused on a single Crisis Command Center as a clearinghouse for inbound and outbound information. This focal point allowed for timely and accurate information gathering and release.
- As soon as it was possible, a command center was set up near the accident site to bring coordination of the response closer to the event.
- The Normal alaskaair.com web site was quickly taken down and replaced with a website that served as an online information dissemination tool. Extra servers were added to support the expected massive number of hits to the website as families, friends, and the public worked to learn more about what was happening.
- A telephone response center separate from reservations was activated, staffed by Family Information Teams, specially trained employees (many working 16
hour days to avoiding busy signals and hold times) to handle inquiries from families and friends and provide as much information as possible. A special toll-free number for victim inquiries was set up and publicized, making contact easier. These teams also began the task of notifying kin that their family members were aboard Flight 261, and coordinated getting CARE Team escorts to assist them with anything they needed.

- Another telephone response center handled the hundreds of calls from news media that began pouring in, allowing the company to share all of the information they could.

- At virtually all sites, from the Family Assistance Center at a hotel in Los Angeles, to airports up and down the west coast, CARE Team members and other employee-escorts helped get the grieving families past clusters of reporters to private briefing rooms where they could be quickly and compassionately provided with information as it became available.

- Horizon Air, Alaska’s sister airline, joined forces with its partner and activated its own emergency response plan to assist Alaska.

- Hundreds of employees company-wide showed up at their workplaces without being requested, wanting just to help any way they could. “Rank gave way to getting the job done. A Vice President became a volunteer typist and made food runs.”

- Escorts helped move families to Los Angeles, into hotels, to briefings and memorials, and back to their home as smoothly as possible.

- Stipends were provided to families to help remove stress caused by near-term financial concerns, making room for the grief that needed to take place.

- Laptops were placed in the family assistance center to allow families to easily e-mail other family members or friends.

- The airline helped coordinate receiving and best utilizing the outpouring of support from the community, including local businesses. Items donated by local businesses were given to the families most in need of them. When Disneyland offered free admission and escorts for the children of parents attending briefings and memorial services, CARE Team members helped gather the children able to attend and make the most of the opportunity to provide the children with something to take their minds off the incredibly saddening (and, from a child’s perspective, boring) events.
Specific Examples in Alaska 261

Overall, CARE Team members did anything they could to make the situation the slightest bit easier for those involved. Whether booking flights, transporting pets and luggage, playing bellhop, filling prescriptions, paying mortgages, or guiding families through Customs and lines of media, they did what was needed. Nothing was out of the question if it would help a family member. Phone bridges were established so families who chose not to travel to southern California could still take part in all briefings.27

One specific example of the efforts of CARE Team members, combined with the teamwork of other employees to do whatever they could, is the help they provided to the Fosmire family. Dayana Eberhardt and Jennifer Buyagawan, Horizon Airlines employees backing up Alaska’s contingent of volunteers, assisted the family in Eugene. Jerri Fosmire, the family’s matriarch, was onboard the flight that crashed. She had left Puerto Vallarta the day before the rest of her family. Five members of the Fosmire family returned home to Eugene, Oregon the following day. An Alaska employee in Oakland helped the Fosmires get through Customs in San Francisco as quickly as possible. Upon arrival in Seattle, the family was met by another employee who secured a private room for their use while they waited for their connecting flight. Once in Eugene, Eberhardt and Buyagawan met the family on the tarmac. The two had obtained a van and were waiting to take the family home directly from the aircraft, avoiding the media that swarmed inside the terminal to catch a glimpse of the grieving family and attempt to interview them.27
Some of the things Sue Warner-Bean, Director of Emergency Response for Alaska, cites as critical to the effectiveness of their response included accessibility by family members to the airline and its executives, meaning no “hiding” took place by the company’s management. Quick distribution of information as soon as it was available was also crucial, as was sensitivity in everything they did (particularly the notification), and keeping families who wanted privacy away from media cameras.  

Ms. Warner-Bean also says that not having extensive rules and guidelines for the CARE Team significantly contributed to their success. The employees were free to do what they needed to on behalf of the company, with the full support of the airline, to assist their assigned family. In the first 24 hours after the crash, only 60 family members had arrived in Los Angeles. But by the end of the operation in southern California, 900 family members were present. It was vital that CARE Team members had the leeway they needed from the company to take the actions they thought best, without special permissions. 

Caregivers form a “circle of love” around relatives and friends of Flight 261 victims during a moment of silence at 4:21 p.m., exactly one year after the jet crashed, during a memorial service at Point Mugu Naval Air Station in California. (January 31, 2001) Photo Credit: Paul Kitagaki Jr./Seattle Post-Intelligencer http://seattlep-i.nwsource.com/photos/subcategory.asp?DisplayType=Slide&SubID=114&Page=16
Arranging a site visit was also very important. On the way to the memorial on the beach near the crash, family members were given a small bag that contained several items the families later commented on as so meaningful: Disposable camera, vials for collecting sand and water from the beach, a flower to leave on the shore, tissues, and hand wipes. A tape of the beach memorial was also given to each family to remember the event. Ms. Warner-Bean reminds that it is details that make the biggest impression. The families seemed to most notice “all the little things” the airline’s team did for them.  

Finally, NTSB plans and briefings were also very important and effective. Together, the effective implementation of response plans by the airline and the NTSB helped put order to the chaos. 

Eighty-eight doves are released above family members at a burial ceremony for unidentified remains from Alaska Airlines Flight 261 at a cemetery in Westlake Village, Calif., yesterday. (January 31, 2001)

http://seattlep-i.nwsource.com/photos/subcategory.asp?SubID=114&DisplayType=Slide

### Media View

The dedication, compassion, and incredible outpouring of hard work from Alaska’s employees, coupled with the never-ending support of the company and its executives, paid off. A February 3, 2000 Seattle Times article read “Chauffeured shopping trips, cash advances, credit cards, cell phones, baby-sitting and help with mortgage payments. That’s some of what Alaska Airlines has provided family and friends of the victims of Flight 261 gathered here.” But no news story, article, editorial, or letter could surpass the significance one can glean from the story Danna Maros, Alaska Airlines director of
special projects tells of the final briefing for family members. “A man got up and said, ‘On behalf of the families, I would like to thank the CARE team members for putting their lives on hold to help us.’” Maros tells of the standing ovation the crowd of families then gave Alaska’s employee-volunteers, lasting nearly a minute. “They’d lost their families and here they were thanking us,” Maros recalled.27

Not long after, Alaska president Bill Ayer encouraged his employees with realism and with truth. “In the weeks and months ahead, the news media is going to try to drag our name through the mud. But when everything is said and done, I guarantee that you are going to be able to hold your heads high and be proud of Alaska Airlines.” Mr. Ayer knew how important the media and public view of his company is, and was aware that the airline’s response would be a very large factor in the future success of the airline as a whole, despite limited negative exposure that might follow.22

At exactly 4:21 p.m., on the one-year anniversary of the Flight 261 crash, Alaska Airlines employees gathered on the airport tarmac in Seattle to observe a moment of silence as an Alaska Airlines jet took off in the distance. (January 31, 2001)
Photo Credit: Mike Urban/Seattle Post-Intelligencer
Closing Thoughts on Alaska 261

If an accident must occur, Ms. Warner-Bean thinks you couldn’t have a better site than Flight 261 had. “There was no burning wreckage for families to have to see.” In contrast, “we had a beach,” she exclaimed. This may have contributed in a small way to how well the response went overall, and how sentimental the scenes of the memorial were. But undoubtedly the serene site was only one factor that allowed Alaska to make the most of caring for the grieving relatives and friends. The carrier’s work to make the entire response, from transportation to memorial, as compassionate and meaningful as possible is no doubt the largest factor in the success of the response.

Though complications in her case developed as a legal battle raged some time later, Earlene Shaw, whose husband was killed on Alaska Flight 261, told a newspaper reporter after the accident “None of us could think of anything the caregivers could have done better.” Bob Jensen of Kenyon says, “Alaska has set an extremely high standard.” With so much attention on TWA’s contrasting negative response, the airline community may now be faced with the question, “Do you want to be an Alaska or a TWA?”
American 1420:

On June 1, 1999 an American Airlines McDonnell Douglass MD-82 left Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport for Little Rock, Arkansas with 145 people on board. While enroute, Flight 1420 encountered heavy thunderstorms, including strong winds. The landing in Little Rock was fast and hard, and the plane skidded off the end of the runway striking a landing light tower, breaking into three parts, and catching fire. Eleven of those on board were killed, and many more injured. Miraculously, some passengers did escape unharmed.8

Company / CARE Team Background

Within minutes, American launched a massive accident response, including deployment of their family assistance team. American’s Team has more than 1200 volunteers, all of whom receive two days of training. Team members have full authority to help the families with whatever they need, from transportation to temporary housing and clothes.29
Public / Professional Views of American’s response

Industry observers say American’s family assistance program is widely regarded as a model of its kind. Clearly, it has changed since the crash in Roselawn, Indiana years earlier when unidentified human remains were buried without the consent of families, personal effects were incinerated, and relatives spent hours on hold. Gail Dunham, president of the Washington-based National Air Disaster Alliance, which represents survivors and family members from over forty air disasters said, “Those who have had American CARE teams have had good things to say. American Airlines CARE team may be the best.” Within one day of the crash of Flight 1420, American had sent 157 CARE Team members to Little Rock. Seventy volunteers had been assigned to the airline’s Southern Reservations Office to prevent busy signals and extended hold times for families, and forty more were at work at the Dallas-Fort Worth headquarters organizing an effective family assistance response.29

The result of American’s work was reflected in an editorial in the Ft. Worth Star-Telegram three weeks after the June 1, 1999 accident. “There is, however, something about the aftermath of the crash of which we who live in the area that American calls home can be proud of. American Airlines employees – our friends and neighbors – responded immediately and in a heartfelt way to help the crash survivors and the families of those who died.” While attorneys say a family assistance team is just an effort to gain the favor of accident victims and keep them from taking legal action against the airline, David Stempler, president of the Airline Travelers Association in Washington says otherwise. In an interview for the Star-Telegram editorial, he calls a good family assistance response by the airlines the “right things to do for the passengers.” Mr. Stempler believes someone who has a just legal claim will not back away just because someone was nice to him or her in a time of need. The editorial closed by encouraging those who work for the airline whose aircraft had crashed. “We believe that American and its employees have a right to be proud of their CARE team.”30
How Are Airlines Addressing Their Responsibilities

Airlines have made significant progress in responding to and exceeding the responsibilities they now have with regard to family assistance after an accident. Airlines are now constantly learning, as most share knowledge with one another and gladly accept help planning from the NTSB and outside experts. They meet together to share information and lessons with one another to improve emergency response by all of carriers. Competition is no boundary for improving family assistance by airlines. And carriers are now also keenly aware of the responsibilities they have, what they entail, and why they are charged with those tasks.¹

Constantly Learning

Even accidents that are well handled provide an opportunity for airlines to learn. Every accident shows areas where improvement can take place. In the case of a Southwest Airlines 737 that ran off the end of the runway in Burbank, California, the first major accident response the company’s 29-year history, most aspects were handled well. “The flight attendants jumped into action”, says passenger Kevin McCoy of Pasadena, CA.

But not everything was handled as well as it could have been. Outside in the cold stormy weather, “they left us all standing in the middle of the road on Hollywood Way for an hour,” says 78-year old Lawson Brown. Southwest says the fire department wanted to make sure everyone was ok before putting them on busses, and police said it took time to round up shuttle busses. But the chilly, wet weather the area was experiencing was a reminder of why acting fast is so incredibly important. The weather, while not perfect, could have been much worse especially if the accident took place in an even colder climate.

But Southwest excelled in many areas. With a few hours, fifty employees had boarded a plane to Burbank and CEO Herb Kelleher held a press conference. Southwest’s assistance team members set up a command center at the Airport Hilton the following day, and “began calling passengers, offering medical care, counseling, even groceries.” Passengers received refunds of their ticket price, vouchers for complimentary future travel, and letters of apology. After years of airlines thinking saying sorry would add to the airline’s liability, Southwest clearly had learned better.³¹
The day after the accident, passenger Kevin McCoy realized he needed more help than he had accepted at the accident site. Mr. McCoy, who spoke highly of flight attendants efforts that night, spoke briefly to an airline assistance team member and thought he was ok then, said “it really hit me” the following day. He says when he couldn’t sleep and broke down uncontrollably, he called the airline’s main 800-number, unaware of the special number that had been set up. But the reservations agent he spoke to had no idea where to send his call and provided him little information. He then called Southwest’s headquarters and was referred to the Red Cross. Mr. McCoy thinks reservations agents should have been more helpful. In retrospect, he should have been reassigned a family assistance team member who could see to it that his needs were met and help him get the emotional assistance he needed.

Why Airlines have the responsibility
Regardless of minor areas for potential improvement, Southwest like so many other major airlines realized their responsibilities and sought to accomplish them as best they could. Thanks in large part to the legislation, coupled with public and media attention, airlines understand they are primarily accountable for an appropriate family assistance response. But the independent experts involved in air disaster response like the NTSB also believe wholeheartedly that airlines themselves should be coordinating the majority of assistance to friends and family of those involved in accidents if the response is to be done best. “The NTSB believes the primary responsibility for victims and their families remains in the hands of the airline. The NTSB plan is based entirely on the premise that without the aid of the airline, the families will not be well served.”

Emergency Response Department
In order to accomplish an effective emergency response, most major airlines now have a department dedicated to planning an appropriate response and carrying out their plans should they ever be needed. Members of these departments seek to best provide what grieving families will most need and expect.

According to Bob Jensen of Kenyon Emergency Services, a contractor to airlines for disaster assistance, families expect the response to be seamless, from airline to
government agencies and outside vendors. They expect to be interviewed only once on each subject with multiple people present if need be, not separate interviews with every group and agency. They want information they give to be properly shared between the involved agencies. “If a victims’ brother tells the airline ‘Don’t call my Dad yet,’” Mr. Jensen says, “he expects the airline to make sure the NTSB and local police don’t call his father, either.”

Family members also appreciate finding out information before media does. Overall, they will view the media is invasive, and most relatives want to be kept away from the press. Some of the media’s actions that hurt relatives cannot be prevented by the airline. In Alaska 261, media photographers paid the operators of a fishing boat to take them out to the crash site very early on. They found a passport floating in the water and retrieved it and photographed the picture and personal information it contained. Just a few hours later, the picture contained on the passport was posted on the newspaper’s website for all to see, including the victim’s family, who had not yet been found and notified. While the airline could have done little to prevent this, it shows the aggressiveness the media will employ to get and publicize pictures of anything and everything involved, no matter how personal or private. This puts into perspective the challenge airlines face in keeping families who want their privacy away from the media to allow them to grieve in private.

Families also want to be part of the investigation. They will be an important part of the follow-up to an accident for quite some time, not just for a few weeks while the country’s spotlight is directly on the crash. Airlines realize that crashes don’t go away. As Mr. Jensen puts it, “Interest dies down, but the families will never go away.” Understanding that fact up front is critical and helps drive an effective response in the long-term. Contrary to the early 1900’s industry practice that NTSB Manager Erik Grosof shared with regard to aviation disasters, Mr. Jenson reminds airlines, “we can’t pretend this didn’t happen.”

**Importance of outside assistance (Red Cross, Kenyon, etc.)**

Airlines realize that outside assistance from organizations like the Red Cross and Kenyon is very important if a response is to be successful. While the airline may hold primary responsibility for assisting families, some of their tasks will be outsourced to those who can best handle them.
The collection of personal effects, including cleaning and cataloging the property so families can claim it if they wish, is generally handled by an outside company. And some aspects of the response, while currently handled internally by most airlines, could be outsourced. Ms. Warner-Bean from Alaska Airlines says that the initial telephone notification of families was perhaps the most traumatic part of what they did in terms of the toll on their employees. An outside vendors call center could be used to alleviate this trauma on airline personnel. Ms. Warner-Bean suggests it is possible the notification is so hard because the team that performs the notifications have no further contact with the families to provide care and support. The job is turned over to the specially trained family assistance team. This leaves those doing the notification doing little more than telling of death.4

In some cases, those who make the notifications are able to do more than merely tell the family of the death of their loved one. Limited support can sometimes be offered over the phone until a family assistance team member can take over. Anusha Joseph, an Alaska employee helping make family notifications shortly after Flight 261 crashed, remembers shaking during a call from a man asking about his grandson. “When I confirmed that his grandson was on the plane, he didn’t want to believe it. Then he said ‘please don’t hang up on me’. I must have talked to him for half an hour. We cried together on the phone.”22

Companies like Kenyon International Emergency Services, which specializes in on-site disaster incident response management and services, are developing their own call centers to take over the job Mr. Joseph did. But many airlines prefer to keep the task of notification in house. With the exception of a call center (which Kenyon is developing), the company is capable of providing nearly all of the services required to satisfy the “Airline tasks” outlined in the NTSB’s Federal Family Assistance Plan. Among other types of companies, airlines can contract with Kenyon for some or all of Kenyon’s services, including planning, training, and responding. While even the largest airlines contract with Kenyon for personal effects and human remains recovery and transportation, smaller airlines unable to muster an adequate response internally can obtain Kenyon’s services right down to the core of the response: a family assistance team to provide compassionate family assistance to meet the immediate needs of family members.33
Small airlines especially need to outsource their responsibilities to perform them effectively. In the case of the EgyptAir crash, while EgyptAir is not a small company, their “footprint” in the United States is small, so extensive help from Kenyon and other contractors was critical.\textsuperscript{12}

Another form of outside assistance airlines (particularly small carriers) arrange is to have a shared plan with other airlines, particularly their subsidiaries and code share partners. Alaska Airlines says having assistance from their subsidiary Horizon Air made a big impact since they were able to combined resources. Given that ten percent of Alaska’s entire workforce had some role in the response, help from Horizon employees filled what otherwise may have been gaps. And because ranks were decimated, keeping the regular operation going was a separate challenge in itself. But Ms. Warner-Bean says there is an “odd advantage with a smaller carrier. There is a much larger sense of ownership in the company by employees. In some way, I think they care more.” A smaller company is also more agile, she believes. Not fighting off a huge negative executive attitude helps employees know they have the support they need to do the right thing for the families. Overall, Ms. Warner-Bean says the primary advantages of a smaller company, ownership and agility, contributed to how well their response went.\textsuperscript{4}

**Future Trends**

Erik Grosof from the NTSB says overall, the recent progress made in family assistance response is working well. The plans are in place, and the few domestic airlines who have had accidents since the recent legislation have performed well. If laws and plans are followed, future responses will look more like Alaska Flight 261, American 1420, and Swissair 111. Mr. Grosof sees the future bringing improvements in the training of employees, those who are members of family assistance teams and those who are not. At some point he hopes all airline employees will have been fully trained in how to be compassionate and sensitive to family members they may come in contact with. Essentially, improvements to what is already established are nearly all that is left at this point. But technological trends will also play a role. The integration of additional automation in the airline industry, like boarding-pass scanning machines, will make reconciliation of passenger manifests a task that can be completed almost instantly when needed.\textsuperscript{1}
While a confirmed manifest is useful for accurately telling family that call the airline whether their loved ones were onboard the involved flight, Frank Carven believes there exists a need for carriers to ask for an emergency contact, rather than merely an administrative contact like a travel agent. This way, carriers could quickly place outbound calls to notify next of kin even faster, rather than waiting for most of them to hear of it an accident on the news and call in to the airline. Mr. Carven says airlines now ask for emergency contact for an international travel, a program that is working well. But domestic reservations do not yet have this policy. “It doesn’t need to be something that is mandatory for the person to provide,” Mr. Carven says. “Just ask. Fast contact is paramount.”

Are airlines best positioned to handle family assistance?

An article published in many newspapers December 12, 2000 questioned the role of airlines and their family assistance teams as the primary caregiver for victims’ families. The article said many family members are “uncomfortable with unburdening themselves to employees of the airline on whose plane their loves ones perished, some relatives recommend that the Red Cross be designated as the sole caregiver.” In one example, Earlene Shaw, whose husband Don was killed on Alaska Airlines Flight 261, said “None of us could think of anything the caregivers could have done better.” But Shaw recalls that some time after the crash, she received a call from her Alaska CARE team member. “She had just… been informed that, if we were going to seek legal recourse, [she] would have to discontinue all association with us,” said Shaw, who had at the time retained a lawyer. “It felt very insincere. Your soul and your absolute being are open to this person who is there with you day and night and all of a sudden gone.” While Alaska Airlines declined to comment in Shaw’s case, laws do not specify when an airline employee should end support, and many carriers believe it is best for the airline’s caregivers to end their relationship as best as possible shortly after the airline’s response is completed, regardless of any lawsuits.

View from “experts”

The article did spark some surprising responses, particularly from advocates who themselves had been involved with family assistance responses. They disagreed with the notion that the Red Cross or others should be handed the primary role. Hans
Ephraimson-Abt, Chairman of the American Association for Families of KAL007 Victims said “the airlines have the means and the organization to take care of the families in the first phases of a crash.” Ephraimson-Abt, who became an advocate for airline family assistance after his daughter was killed on Korean Air Lines Flight 007 when it was shot down by a Soviet fighter jet in 1983, emphasizes how important it is that airlines keep this role. “They have the personnel to get 1,000 to 1,500 volunteers. They have the telephone banks to respond to inquiries. They have the resources to get families to the scene.”

And Frank Carven, the TWA800 advocate portions of whose personal interview is included earlier in this report, said in the article “Whoever is running these airlines understands the bottom line. An accident can put you out of business overnight. Or you can take a bad situation and treat people fairly and that will only add to those who use your service.”

The NTSB’s Mr. Grosof says “there are certain things about an air crash that only airline people will understand. The airline has a responsibility”. He also says having that job gives airline personnel a “sense of ownership” to help those who have been harmed by the loss of a loved one on a flight operated by their employer. Mr. Grosof says as long as they are well trained, family assistance teams operated by the airlines are a good thing. They provide a positive feeling for airline employees to feel they’ve done their part. And of course in the airlines own people are inevitably involved in the accident as well, so airline employees feel a connection to those who have also lost family and friends in the accident.

Jeffrey Erickson, then-CEO of TWA said, “It is hard to imagine how a government agency or private relief organization could be any more empathetic than airline employees who, in this tragic case, lost 52 of our own co-workers and family members.”
Advocacy Groups

In response to the poorly handled accidents of the 1980’s and early 1990’s, several major advocacy groups lobbied for legislation to change the face of family assistance response. The groups have become incredibly important to how modern air disaster family assistance has taken shape. The NTSB for example, works with “representatives of many of the family advocacy groups to ensure that we address issues they believe are of greatest importance immediately following an accident.”

National Air Disaster Alliance

One of those groups that coordinate with the NTSB is the National Air Disaster Alliance/Foundation (NADA/F). Douglas Smith, the organizations president said in 1996 “These groups are so vital because families are able to come together in common grief and, as they become united, force issues that can create significant change and movement not only as it relates to a crash, but to the entire industry.” Most of these associations rose out of families frustration with how they and others were treated by both the airlines and government agencies after an accident, including lack of an effective response, not being forthcoming with critical information, and offensive practices in the recovery and identification of victims and their property.

Founded In 1995, the goal of NADA/F is to improve how families of airline disasters are treated. Operating much as a lobbying organization, the group developed the proposal to protect the rights of family members following an accident, and lobbied for the developed and passage of the Air Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996. NADA/F is also active in providing public testimony and attending professional conferences, seeking improved aviation safety and disaster response. The association also has been recognized with the ability to make recommendations to the FAA Aviation Rule Making Advisory Committees (ARAC), which is the decision-making arm of the FAA.
ACCESS

As important as lobbying for change may be for victims of air disasters, long-term emotional support is also very necessary. Michelle Librett, whose husband of 14 years died on Swissair 111, still felt isolated in her grief two months after the accident. She was desperate to connect to someone who “understood the shock and full emotion that I was going through.” Through a group called AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, or ACCESS, she was connected to the wife of a man who died in TWA Flight 800. ACCESS, a grass-roots organization based in New York, pairs up people involved in aviation disasters to find support from others who have gone through what they are now experiencing.34

ACCESS’ website says the organization formed after the TWA800 disaster. While the airline, the Red Cross, and many other organizations provided much needed help in the near-term, that help seemed to dissipate as days turned to months and survivors dispersed. It was at this point, according to ACCESS, that while shock subsided, the grief intensified. Heidi Snow, who experienced this description, founded ACCESS after realizing what was needed was a long-term, non-political, and non-crash specific peer grief support network for victims and survivors of all aviation accidents, and receiving an enthusiastic response from others involved in the TWA800 disaster.35
Poem by Rita Moran

Printed in “The Compassionate Friends” newsletter in Fort Lauderdale, FL

PLEASE, don’t ask me if I’m over it yet
I’ll never be over it.

PLEASE, don’t tell me she’s in a better place.
She isn’t here with me.

PLEASE, don’t say at least she isn’t suffering.
I haven’t come to terms with why she had to suffer at all.

PLEASE, don’t tell me you know how I feel,
Unless you have lost a child.

PLEASE, don’t ask me if I feel better.
Bereavement isn’t a condition that clears up.

PLEASE, don’t tell me at least you had her for so many years.
What year would you choose for your child to die?

PLEASE, don’t tell me God never gives us more than we can bear.

PLEASE, just say you are sorry.
PLEASE, just say you remember my child, if you do.
PLEASE, just let me talk about my child.
PLEASE, mention my child’s name.

PLEASE, just let me cry.
Closing

Airline family assistance response has come a long way in a short timeframe. For nearly three quarters of a century, little attention was paid to family assistance after an air disaster by airlines or the American public. But that changed dramatically just in the last decade, and so did the response provided by airlines. Within a few short years, the efforts of advocacy organizations, the NTSB, Congress, and airlines’ themselves have led to a system that American travelers can be proud of.

While no airline or passenger ever wants to see an accident occur, and though they are becoming less frequent as air safety measures increase, accidents are an inevitable part of air travel. It is an effective, caring, and compassionate response by all involved that will allow airline personnel to know they did all they could to comfort those in need, and will allow families to receive the immediate care that is so important.

If the families involved in future accidents continue stand up and thank the airline and its family assistance team the way families involved in Alaska 261 did, despite their intense grief, then Americans can know that the long battle to improve the treatment of families after an air disaster has been accomplished. The significance of a family member announcing to the family assistance team “On behalf of the families, I would like to thank the CARE team members for putting their lives on hold to help us,” followed by a standing ovation from the crowd of families cannot be compared with a newspaper article or expert analysis.
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