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Coroners play key role in identification of victims By Shelly Whitehead
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Three Northern Kentucky coroners played key roles this week in helping to identify bodies and personal belongings at the site of Sunday's deadly plane crash in Lexington.

As members of Kentucky's Mass Fatality Team, Grant County Coroner Marylee Willoby and her husband, Deputy Coroner Mike Willoby, were called to help handle the bodies of victims of downed Comair Flight 5191 Sunday afternoon. Bracken County Coroner John Parker was also called to the crash site to work for a Texas company that reclaims and identifies personal effects at disaster scenes.

As part of the Mass Fatality Team, the Willobys have trained to respond to emergencies involving large numbers of deaths, like the early Sunday morning crash at Lexington's Bluegrass Airport that killed all but one of the 50 people on board.

Marylee Willoby said she and her husband were among a group of about 28 coroners and deputy coroners from across the commonwealth who set up the state morgue in Frankfort to assist with autopsies and identify victims bodies.

Willoby said the team worked extremely well together, allowing autopsies on all 49 bodies to be completed by Monday night. Likewise, she said the remains of all but 11 victims of the fiery crash had been identified by Wednesday night.

"It was a really good team effort ... and if we hadn't trained and practiced for this it wouldn't have gone nearly that well," she said. She said it took about 90 minutes to process each victim, including the autopsy and logging in of personal effects.

"There weren't a lot of personal effects though - very few had identifying items with them," she said. The Atlanta-bound Comair jet crashed a short distance from the end of a shorter runway that authorities said it had not been cleared to take off from Sunday morning. Investigators are still trying to determine why pilots attempted to take flight from that airstrip - an action they suspect sent the aircraft crashing into a farm field, where it broke into pieces and erupted into flames. The co-pilot and sole crash survivor, James Polehinke, was pulled from the flames and remains unconscious at a Lexington hospital.

Marylee Willoby said dental and medical records were still being accumulated for the 11 victims whose remains have yet to be identified.

The Willoby family's participation in the crash aftermath also included their son, Lexington Police Officer Rick Willoby, who was in charge of the Lexington airport command post. Rick Willoby is also Grant County's emergency management director.

"Mike celebrated our 42nd wedding anniversary Monday by eating a Red Cross meal at the morgue ... so it's been a real family effort on the Willobys' part this week," Marylee Willoby said. She said some people ask her how she can cope with so many deaths at once. "Well, each individual has to deal with it in their own way," she said. "... But really, it makes it all worth it when some family member gives you a hug or sends you a thank-you note because they see their loved ones were cared for in a respectful manner."

Willoby said she was part of Kentucky's team responding to Hurricane Katrina this time last year and felt equally proud of the state's response there.

Parker, the Bracken County coroner, is working at the crash site working for Houston-based Kenyon International to find and identify personal belongings from the scene. The company would not allow Parker to speak directly to the media about his responsibilities, but Kenyon International spokesman Frank Ciaccio said the business employs coroners to respond to such disasters across the country. "We do recovery and identification of the personal effects, baggage and personal items on board the aircraft," Ciaccio said. "...We have team members throughout the country, who work on a contractual basis, who we deploy."