Airlines Help Traumatized Family Members After Major Disasters

BY BRIAN ALEXANDER

When a major airline carrier like Malaysia Airlines suffers a disaster like the disappearance of flight MH370, a crisis management program is immediately triggered to assist family members.
government resources and the resources of other organizations to support efforts of local and State governments and the air carrier to meet the needs of aviation disaster victims and their families,” according to NTSB’s Federal Family Assistance Plan for Aviation Disasters.

The law sets out a number of steps airlines must follow to aid those affected by an accident.

“The air carrier has a fundamental responsibility to victims and their families affected by an aviation disaster,” the NTSB states. “The air carrier's primarily responsible for family notification and all aspects of victim and family logistical support.” This includes providing transportation to the accident city.

The first action is usually the establishment by the air carrier of a Family Assistance Center to serve as a private, secure place where family members can go to receive information and learn about resources, such as grief counseling, accommodations and transportation available to them.

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“Professional crisis counseling services are available to family members, survivors and friends through the American Red Cross,” at the Family Assistance Center – usually set up in a nearby hotel -- according to the NTSB. Those not able or willing to travel to the center can obtain such counseling at home through their local Red Cross chapters in coordination with the TDA division.

The airline will work with local clergy, psychologists, and medical personnel to provide grief support. What form that counseling takes depends upon the family’s wishes. It could be a simple chat with clergy, or formal therapy.
Any airline flying into the United States is required to meet the requirements of the Family Assistance Act. Last month, Asiana Airlines was fined $500,000 for failing to properly assist families following the runway accident in San
designated “concierge” to answer questions, handle travel arrangements, and advise on grief counselors.

As a major international carrier with regular flights into the U.S., and as a member of the One World Alliance, which also includes airlines like American Airlines, British Airways, and Japan Airlines, Malaysia Airlines could be expected to follow these protocols.

Every accident is different, and the circumstances surrounding flight MH307 are unusual. The counseling and aid to families in Kuala Lumpur may differ from that offered to families in the plane’s destination in Beijing according to differences in local law and customs. But the International Air Transport Association (IATA) holds training classes to help airlines prepare for these very situations and most follow the same basic guidelines.

The longer term trauma for family members won’t stop once the plane is found, of course. Airlines hire outside experts to manage logistics and ongoing management. Kenyon International Emergency Services is one major contractor that assists airlines with body identification, the
Mozambique. It also provided a mobile mortuary and arranged counseling and other services.

No airline wants to be seen as skimping on helping grieving, distraught family members in a time of crisis.

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LONDON - Grieving relatives of passengers on missing Flight 370 were forced to move out of their hotel Friday because it was booked by the Ferrari Formula One racing team competing in the Malaysian Grand Prix.

F1 boss Bernie Ecclestone told NBC News the booking at the Cyberview Hotel in Kuala Lumpur would have been made long before the Malaysia Airlines jet disappeared two weeks ago.

More than a dozen Chinese family members, who traveled to the Malaysian capital to get updates on the search for the Boeing 777, were transferred to another hotel in the city by the airline on Friday.

About 3,000 drivers, engineers and other support workers travel to each Grand Prix destination, and hotels in Kuala Lumpur are already filling up ahead of the race on Sunday March 30.
Ecclestone said teams made their own travel arrangements and that the decision to move other guests would have been a matter for the hotel.

The Ferrari team, based in Maranello, northern Italy, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Eccelstone expressed sympathy for the families and said the hotel would have faced a difficult decision.

"I feel terribly, terribly sorry for these people," he said. "But it is up to the hotel. What would happen if you told somebody that they no longer had a booking? You would get sued, I’d imagine.”