

The Evolution of Aviation Disaster Family Assistance: Compassionate Care in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The commercial aviation industry, particularly in the United States, continues to experience one of the safest periods in its history. From March 2009 to October 2019 there were two fatalities resulting from an aircraft accident involving a Part 121 airline in the United States (1). Any loss of life or injury to persons as a result of an aviation accident in the United States or elsewhere in the world is a tragedy and requires assistance from the involved air carrier. Much like the evolution of accident investigation and introduction of Safety Management Systems (SMS), the aviation disaster family assistance domain is also evolving, and must continue to do so, to meet the needs of those affected by an aircraft accident. This evolution must continue to expand beyond traditional family assistance legislation, processes, and practices.

The collective aviation industry, from regulators, operators, manufacturers, agencies, vendors, employees, and passengers share a collective goal: to safely transport people to the people and places in life that are important to them. The industry operates within a risk-based safety system that is designed to prevent accidents when possible, and to investigate them if they do, while caring for all those involved. In the United States, aviation disaster family assistance legislation has been in existence since 1996, called for by family groups who had experienced considerable loss and those in government and industry who served them absent any documented legal obligation. Since its passage, that legislation has experienced limited change. Some responsible for enacting this assistance have since had full careers, many with the

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good fortune to never put into practice what they planned for. The traveling public trusts commercial aviation, and with good reason, but when an accident occurs all those involved in aviation disaster family assistance hope to answer “yes” to one question without hesitation: “Are we prepared for this?”

In this paper, the author proposes to explore the changes in family assistance brought on by the passage of time since legislation and guidance documentation were written and implemented in the United States, the challenge of decreasing institutional and experiential knowledge of family assistance as a result of the excellent improvement in aviation safety, and the beginnings of a virtual revolution of family assistance accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will also explore the individual and collective roles of air carrier emergency response teams, investigators, government agencies, and vendors working to serve and care for those affected by an aircraft accident.

Introduction: Why Family Assistance?

ISASI represents a collective group of the world’s finest aviation safety professionals working together through objective and transparent sharing of information to promote the development and improvement of incident and accident investigation. Through its purpose and design, ISASI and its members are guardians and servants to those affected by an accident: the survivors, families, and communities. The work will forever be intertwined and require the same level of dedication, selflessness, and sense of duty.

Tragedy & Change

The 1990s

The process of assisting those who have lost a loved one due to an aircraft accident, or those who survived, has been a need for as long as accidents have existed. The requirement to do so, however, is just now approaching its 25th anniversary. While there was no shortage of tragic accidents throughout the 20th century, it is without a doubt that the 1990s are the decade when the glaring need for formalization of family assistance became apparent.

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In the United States, this period saw several significant accidents that exposed the raw truth that the families of those lost were not receiving appropriate and consistent care in the worst moment in their lives. While not solely responsible, accidents like *USAir 427* in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania on September 8, 1994; *American Eagle 4184* in Roselawn, Indiana on October 31, 1994; *ValuJet 592* on May 11, 1996 near Miami, Florida; and *Trans World Airlines 800* on July 17, 1996 in East Moriches, New York resulted in similar struggles for the families of those lost. Family groups struggled to get information on the status of their loved ones from the airline and responding agencies, saw media outlets reporting information they had not yet been told, and weren't provided resources to begin the next chapter of their lives following the loss.

Call to Action

For some family groups, seeing the repeated challenges and suffering formed a bond and a cause, to do everything in their power to create change so that others would not experience what they did, even as accidents continued to occur. These groups called upon the United States Government to examine the failures and find a better way. Accounts of their traumatic experiences would eventually be published, via family letters and testimony, in the final report of the *Task Force on Assistance to Families of Aviation Disasters*, Co-Chaired by the then-Secretary of Transportation and the Chairman of the NTSB (2).

Legislation & Guidance

Following several years of advocacy and collaboration with members of the United States Congress and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act was introduced and passed in September 1996, codifying requirements through the Department of Transportation for airlines to establish plans to care for the families of those impacted by an accident, followed by similar legislation for foreign airlines flying into the United States (4). It also established the NTSB as the agency responsible for overseeing family assistance through the Transportation Disaster Assistance Division and for developing guidance documentation for airlines to ensure the requirements of the legislation were met (5).

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The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) also established consistent practices airlines should use. In 1998, the ICAO Assembly acknowledged that “the policy of ICAO should be to ensure that the mental, physical and spiritual well-being of victims involved in civil aviation accidents and their families are considered and accommodated by ICAO and its contracting States.” (6)

ICAO Circular 285 *Guidance on Assistance to Aircraft Accident Victims and their Families* was issued in 2001 (later reissued as Doc 9973 in 2013) (7), followed by inclusion in Annex 9 in 2005. (8)

Priorities of Family Members

In the years that followed, the NTSB found consistent priorities that families would need addressed following an accident. These priorities provide the framework for airlines and all other organizations involved in family assistance to build their response plans and ensure that their moral and legal obligations are met.

Notification of Involvement

Families need to be contacted as soon as information is available on their loved one, even if the information is not fully confirmed. For example, if a family member asks if their loved one’s name appears on an initial list of reservations for the accident flight, even if the passenger manifest has not yet been fully reconciled, airlines must share that information. Airlines must have dedicated toll-free phone numbers that are staffed by trained employees or a qualified vendor, and widely publicize this number with the media. Families crave information and it is required of and incumbent on the airline to provide factual information as it is available.

Access to Information

Airlines must continue to inform family members of the next steps once their loved one has been verified on the accident flight, to include what information will be available to them, where and how it will be shared, and who will be sharing it with them.

Victim Accounting

Once it has been confirmed that their loved one was involved in the accident, a family's first priority will likely shift to asking "Where are they? What is their status?". Airlines must ensure that they provide the information available to them and ensure that they are deferring information on search and rescue, confirmed survivors, and confirmed fatalities to the appropriate authorities. Airlines must work in collaboration with the organization or agency responsible for victim accounting where the accident occurred to share information that will assist with the victim accounting process.

Personal Effects

After learning the status and location of their loved one, or potentially simultaneously, families will want to know where the belongings of their loved one are. They will want to know their condition and when and if they will be getting them back. Airlines most often use vendors trained in appropriate personal effects recovery, cleaning, and restoration to ensure that any recovered item associated with a passenger is returned to the family, if they decide to receive it. Airlines must also ensure that any unclaimed personal effects are retained for at least 18 months from the date of the accident.

Evolution of Family Assistance Over Time**Experience Leads the Way**

As the 20th century gave way to the 21st, the legislation experienced limited change. Several amendments were incorporated to better define needs. The industry, however, continued to refine and improve family assistance processes as airlines built out emergency response and family assistance teams, organized industry working groups, and learned from accidents.

Public & Industry Expectations

While industry experience was being gained through those various means, the public awareness of the new requirements and assistance also increased. When an accident occurred, the media was better prepared to report on the assistance being provided to the families and/or survivors based on the

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legislated requirements. An important confluence of these expectations and industry learnings assisted with building robust programs and training in the private and public sectors.

Technology & Information Dissemination

In the 1990s and 2000s, dissemination of information was primarily via cable news channels, phone conversations, and printed media. The legislated requirements for airlines were mostly based on these mediums and continue to be today. Airlines find themselves in a position of needing to ensure they maintain the right level of technological support and expertise to meet these requirements, such as public toll-free numbers separate from their normal reservations lines, secure private toll-free numbers dedicated for families, and the ability to integrate with secure conferencing tools to link remote family members to family briefings at the on-scene Family Assistance Center.

At the same time, airlines must also ensure that they are prepared to respond to, and appropriately leverage, their social media accounts to disseminate and collect information from family members who may reach out via one of those channels. They must have plans in place to rapidly update their website to link information about the accident and appropriately adjust their branding. Some airlines have implemented customer service chat functionality, either automated, staffed by a live representative, or both. They must ensure that the same level of training is provided to those who manage these communication tools as those who answer the phone lines when an accident occurs, and direct families to the toll-free number for assistance.

In the United States, the legislation requires the airline to establish public facilities in the departure and destination cities of the accident flight to broadcast any NTSB Hearings that are conducted, while these hearings themselves are now streamed publicly via the NTSB's website. Through close collaboration with the NTSB and other agencies, airlines can ensure that they not only meet the requirements, but also provide the best level of assistance to those affected by the accident using modern technology.

Improvements in Aviation Safety

There is arguably no greater achievement in the aviation industry than the marked increase in safety. Investigations, their recommendations, voluntary safety reporting, safety cultures, and Safety Management Systems (SMS) have produced a significant decrease in accident rates. This is of course a never-ending pursuit and never complete, and while it would never be traded away, it is not without downside impacts.

Loss of Knowledge & Experience

Real-World Experience Decreases

Some emergency response managers may tell you they are “setting up a business they hope to never run.” For some, that has been true, particularly related to large-scale hull-loss fatality accidents. Reviewing the decrease in accidents over the past ten to twenty years coupled with the average career span of an airline emergency response manager indicates many have been fortunate to have full careers with limited real-world experience.

Family assistance programs must rely on industry benchmarking and collaboration between airlines, government, public sector response agencies, and vendors to ensure they are prepared. Training programs have shifted from review of past accidents to role play of theoretical scenarios. Airlines must be prepared to adapt how they prepare and not let their guard down based solely on the increase in safety.

The COVID-19 Factor: Airlines in Distress

The ongoing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19) pandemic has decimated more than one industry; however, the travel industry, and namely airlines, suffered the most catastrophic impact in their history (9). A near overnight loss of passenger revenue, coupled with the need to source equipment to protect their employees, resulted in drained capital, long-term storage of idle aircraft, and employees taking early retirements or extended leaves. Pay cuts, furloughs, and layoffs were planned, and in some cases implemented, while awaiting pending government assistance. Most airlines with “in house” family assistance teams rely on their front-line

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workforce to staff these teams, and as that workforce dwindled through one of more of these ways, their rosters began to drop.

A reduction in operations, however, does not result in the ability to reduce staffing or support for emergency response and family assistance programs. The impact of an accident with a carrier flying one aircraft is the same as a carrier flying a fleet of several hundred.

Investing in Emergency Response

The airlines will rebound, and as of this writing some have begun to see the return of passengers, however additional variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus continue to emerge. Airlines must prioritize investing in their emergency response programs with qualified, expert talent that can both maintain and grow their processes for the future. A failure of one airline to properly respond could result in a cascading impact across the industry.

Virtual Family Assistance

Immediate Contingency Planning

Most airline family assistance programs are based on the traditional model of a Family Assistance Center established in the accident location, often a hotel or large conference facility. Hotels are established for families, survivors, employees and responders, and vendors. A Joint Family Support Operations Center (JFSOC) is set up for the leaders of the respective agencies at the Family Assistance Center to oversee and coordinate all operations. Airline family assistance plans have already contained provisions to assist families who did not want to travel by dispatching a member of their staff to the family.

Airlines and other agencies had to immediately evaluate how they would respond to an accident without the ability to coexist in some of these locations. Go-Teams were cut to only the personnel essential to establish an operation in the accident location. It simply would not be possible to continue the traditional model during this time. Platforms like Microsoft® Teams and Zoom© were in various states of adoption within some organizations and there was no guarantee that family assistance team members or

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families themselves would possess the necessary technology or ability to use them to effectively give and receive assistance. Airlines had to ensure they had contingency plans to secure devices that could be sent to employee and family homes while still preparing for some on-scene representation.

Long-Term Planning & Implementation

While it is still too early to know for certain, the industry generally believes that the mindset of most families will continue to be the desire to travel to the on-scene Family Assistance Center once it is safe to do so. The need to have trained teams who can provide virtual assistance and the tools to do so, however, will certainly be part of the expectation and need moving forward.

Training

The rapid onset of the pandemic, closing of airline headquarters and training facilities, and inability to move employees around their system to conduct family assistance training required airlines to pivot quickly to ensure they were providing required and appropriate training to their employees. Some may have already begun to develop or implement types of virtual training; however, family assistance training has long traditionally had an in-person/instructor-led component to ensure the appropriate skills for interacting with family members and survivors are demonstrated and reviewed. Some family assistance volunteers had limited to no familiarity or access to virtual training tools.

As a result of these challenges, coupled with the lack of funding to develop new training programs, some airlines postponed training throughout 2020 and began building stopgap measures to continue to hone the skills of their family assistance teams while turning their focus to long-term solutions once the world begins to emerge from the pandemic. Virtual family assistance training can, and likely will be, an effective opportunity for airlines to continue to build their program and reach more employees across their system.

Our Collective Role & Responsibility

Collaboration: Preparing as an Industry

Aviation disaster family assistance is a complicated and connected link of airlines, government agencies (including their respective investigators), non-government/non-profit agencies, vendors, and business partners. Several of these groups have legislated responsibilities to provide family assistance while others are an integral part of ensuring a successful response.

These groups must continuously meet, discuss, train, and exercise together. While individual roles and responsibilities may differ, each possess the same desire to do their part for those affected by these disasters. As a combined force, they are not only able to provide assistance, but also advocate for and influence change in the industry.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

As a result of the progression of time since legislation was passed, the decrease in accidents, and loss of experiential knowledge and talent within the industry, airlines and all those involved in aviation disaster family assistance must blend the traditional and legacy ways of family assistance with the needs and abilities of today. The mission remains the same, to provide the most compassionate care and assistance possible to those who have experienced an accident or lost a loved one, not just to meet the requirements of legislation or the practices in guidance documentation, but more importantly to exceed those requirements where possible. We cannot heal and we cannot provide closure, but we can provide the best of all of us, individually and collectively, and they deserve nothing less.

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