



INTERPOL

DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION UNIT

INTERPOL DVI Family Liaison Strategy

1 OVERVIEW

One of the most important considerations in the aftermath of a disaster is the relationship between bereaved families and the police.

The term 'disaster' in this context should be taken as any incident involving a large number of casualties and where a Disaster Victim Identification Coordinator has been appointed.

These guidelines will not distinguish between types of incidents that may require a DVI approach but will offer generic advice on family liaison in the immediate aftermath, which is intended to make sure that families are treated appropriately, with respect and according to their diverse needs.

The hours and days following a disaster are intense and confusing for all concerned. Especially for the families of the missing who are desperately in need of information.

Once a family has reported their loved one missing, it would be good practice to appoint a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) to them.

The benefits of having this dedicated point of contact would be to ensure that:

- ante-mortem information is gathered without delay;
- INTERPOL DVI forms are completed urgently and accurately;
- any physical material which could aid identification is gathered in an appropriate manner which would stand up to forensic scrutiny at home and abroad.
- all relevant statements are taken from the family (see section 3 below for a definition of 'family') with regard to lifestyle and history.
- the family is provided at all times with timely, accurate and honest information about the investigation or recovery operation;
- the family can be helped through the workings of the justice system regardless of where the event takes place in order to prevent unnecessary additional trauma;
- all requests by families to view their loved ones can be arranged, where practicable;
- visits to the scene(s) are made possible (reflecting modern practice);
- information regarding support agencies is supplied to families in order that the police do not get distracted from their main task;
- all dealings with the family are recorded in the family liaison log, copies of which should be retained by the investigation team;
- there is no duplication of requests made to the family, which could affect the family's confidence in the procedure;

- families are consulted about any police media strategy which will generate interest in them as a family. Advice to families from police media representatives would be beneficial in this area.

2 STRATEGIC AIM

To ensure the most effective investigation possible into the death of an individual in a mass fatality incident by the immediate implementation of a Family Liaison Strategy, which will include the deployment of a trained police investigator to every family believed to have lost a relative in the incident.

3 KEY ELEMENTS

3.1.1 Victim identification

This will facilitate the rapid and accurate identification of disaster victims and human remains by timely collection and collation of ante-mortem information.

3.1.2 Investigation

An investigative framework will facilitate the two-way documented flow of information between the DVI Commander and the family, and the identification of critical intelligence which will support the overall investigation. It will also supply all relevant information to the family about the judicial process.

3.1.3 Community reassurance

A joint media strategy will be agreed as far as possible with the family in order to encourage witnesses to come forward, whilst giving the public and community reassurance in the investigative process.

3.1.4 Support from other agencies

Families need to have access to information, which will enable them to make informed decisions around the support/assistance that can be obtained from other relevant organizations.

4 WHAT IS A FAMILY?

The definition of what makes up an individual's family is extremely important to the delivery of the family liaison function.

In law enforcement terms, it is important to recognize the wide variations of the 'family' which can be influenced by culture, lifestyle and preference.

In the context of this document the term 'family' should include:

- Partners
- Parents
- Siblings
- Children
- Guardians
- And others who have had a direct and close relationship with the victim.

Particular care should be taken to address the wishes of the family at all times, with sensitivity and understanding exercised around families with diverse lifestyles.

Assumptions about the definition of a family should never be made and the DVI Commander should try at all times to respond to the wishes of surviving family member(s).

5 MAIN ROLES

5.1.1 DVI Commander

The DVI Commander will be responsible for the overall strategy relating to recovery, identification and repatriation issues.

Family liaison will fall within this strategy and as such will require a distinct strategy of its own which will serve to complement and enhance the overall effort.

The strategy should seek to address staffing levels, clear chains of command and an agreed disclosure policy in order that only approved information is given to families. This will also ensure a consistent message when dealing with large numbers of relatives and friends.

The key objectives of the family liaison strategy should be to:

- Provide the family with as full and up-to-date information as possible about the incident and its investigation.
- Obtain full family background and other relevant details as directed by the DVI Commander.

The disclosure of appropriate information to families should be seen as high priority and a dedicated disclosure officer would be highly advantageous. At this time, the families will be in desperate need for information and it is important that the police can identify themselves as the primary and most reliable source.

Efforts to do this will be appreciated by families and will help maintain their confidence in the police operation.

The DVI Commander should appoint a Family Liaison Coordinator(s) to manage the Family Liaison Officers, as outlined below.

5.1.2 Family Liaison Coordinator

DVI Commanders should consider appointing a supervisor to coordinate the work of the Family Liaison Officers.

The role of the Family Liaison Coordinator (FLC) will be to:

- Facilitate the delivery of the Family Liaison Strategy through acting as a tactical advisor to the FLOs;
- Act as a channel for welfare support;
- Liaise nationally and internationally to share and gather good practice;
- Monitor the workloads of FLOs to avoid burnout;
- Ensure that there is no duplication of effort, which would impact on resources and families;
- Make sure that any necessary equipment such as vehicles and telephones are made available to FLOs;
- Liaise with other appropriate agencies in order to assist the exit of police FLOs at the relevant time with a seamless and efficient handover;

- Act as a quality assurance point for FLO work thereby ensuring that the DVI Commander receives timely and accurate updates from the family contact;
- Ensure that all relevant paperwork from the FLOs is completed and submitted in a timely and efficient manner;
- Support and advise the DVI Commander on issues relating to the delivery of Family Liaison.

5.1.3 Family Liaison Officer

The role of the FLO involves the day-to-day management of the relationship with the family in the investigation and close liaison with the coordinator and the DVI Commander to ensure that families are treated appropriately, professionally and in accordance with their diverse needs.

It may involve working in a variety of situations in very demanding and stressful conditions over sustained periods of time.

It is essential that the FLOs are selected from volunteers who have the appropriate skills and qualities.

All FLOs should already be trained to a standard of DVI awareness that would allow them to have a full understanding of the ongoing operation. This is extremely important, as they will need to explain these processes to a bereaved family.

They should also be able to explain the roles of the other key practitioners.

The primary role of the FLO will be that of an investigator. In performing that role the FLO should be mindful of the boundaries that exist between offering professional and practical support as opposed to offering personal and emotional support.

These are areas in which the family should seek the support of other appropriate agencies. The FLO may be able to assist in the identification of such agencies.

The provision of an advice pack at the outset would be advantageous to the family and assist the FLO to deal with many of the questions the family may need answered over a period of time.

The Coordinator should be able to assist in this process by doing much of this research in the background whilst allowing the FLO to get on with the important task of gathering ante-mortem information.

6 OPERATING PROTOCOLS

6.1.1 Selection of people to act as FLOs

It is essential that the FLOs are primarily if not exclusively dedicated to the task. To perform the function effectively they must be an integral part of the DVI response.

Consideration should be given to the deployment of a deputy FLO. Such a deployment has benefits for the family and the investigation in that it provides for greater resilience in the liaison function at times when the principal FLO is unavailable due to sickness, leave, court commitments and so on.

Also, data and material may need to be collected from a number of family members and this will speed up the process.

In considering the deployment of the FLOs, the DVI Commander should take account of the FLOs' ability to perform that role effectively at that time.

The following circumstances will have a bearing on the selection process:

- A recent bereavement of a close relative or partner or other major life trauma;
- Frequency of recent deployment in the role;
- Existing workload;
- Availability – leave, court commitments and so on;
- Previous experience in the role.

On occasions, gender may be a critical factor for cultural reasons.

Where the victim's family is from a minority group or particular lifestyle, consideration should be given to the deployment of an FLO with particular knowledge and experience of that community.

In the event of a terrorist incident, or other similarly motivated attack where one or more minority communities have been affected, advice should be sought from community advocates when writing a Family Liaison Strategy in order to ensure it reflects the needs of those communities at that time.

6.1.2 Training required

At the end of any course designed for the training of FLOs the students should be able to:

- Identify the main responsibilities of the FLO in relation to the overall police response;
- Outline the responsibilities of the FLO in relation to the management of ante-mortem information;
- Outline the command structure in a DVI Incident;
- Explain the relationship between the Family Liaison Strategy and the overall strategy as set out by the DVI Commander;
- Identify the main responsibilities of the Family Liaison Coordinator in DVI Incidents;
- Outline the potential issues in relation to ethnicity, culture and lifestyle diversity when dealing with a bereaved family, for example, death rites, funerals, and so on;
- Outline the processes that are usually involved with grieving and the effect that an enquiry may have on this;
- Outline the role of Coroner or other judicial inquest within the context of any particular incident;
- Explain the methods that may be used to identify a victim after a disaster;
- Outline issues relating to releasing bodies and post mortems;
- Explain the importance of collecting forensic samples correctly;
- Identify the issues that should be considered in relation to the return of property;
- Outline the importance of accurate record keeping in their dealings with a family;

- Outline the effect that media coverage could have on a bereaved family;
- Formulate a strategy that will enable them to exit from the family at the appropriate time;
- Recognize the circumstances when specialist intervention may be required;
- Identify tactical options for dealing with unexpected developments;
- Identify the assistance that could be given by the relevant support agencies that are available to a family during and after an enquiry.

6.1.3 Risk assessment

As with any deployment, the family liaison function needs to be included on its own in any generic risk assessment.

This should be reviewed on a regular basis. Particular attention should be paid if and when the circumstances of the liaison change in any of the following ways:

a) People

Has the family group changed in structure? Have other family members started to act as spokesperson for the family?

There is always potential for media intrusion inside a family. Care must be taken to make sure that information is given only to the right people.

b) Action/activity

During the deployment, the activities of the FLO with the family may change. This can be due to new information, media intrusion or developments in the investigation.

It should be ensured at all times that any new activities not previously undertaken by the FLO are subject to the same risk assessment.

c) Location

If the family liaison function is to take place at a location that has not previously been risk assessed this should be conducted immediately.

Every effort should be taken to establish as much information about any premises and its occupants. The risk assessment should take into account any community tension that may exist in that location.

d) Environment

The address where the liaison is taking place may be viewed (for at least part of the liaison function) as the workplace of the FLO.

It is therefore crucial that the environment is not detrimental to their health. This would obviously be affected if anyone at the address was suffering from a contagious disease or if the home contained any hazardous substances.

On a more subtle level, however, this could also include any changes to dynamics within the family and between the police and the family, which could make working within the family home a more risky environment.

Much of this assessment work can be carried out by the FLO themselves as they go about their business but it is the duty of the FLO Coordinator and the DVI Commander to ensure that they are regularly reviewed as part of the overall management and supervision function.

It should also be emphasized that the 'risk' that is referred to applies not only to the individual FLO but to factor that could cause potential harm to the confidence of the family and the broader community in the overall police response.

6.1.4 Communication with the family

It is extremely important that the appointed Family Liaison Officer(s) become the primary point of contact with the family.

The needs of the investigation have to be balanced against the needs of the bereaved. High quality communication can often overcome difficulties in this area.

Previous experience has shown that one of the most difficult things that families have to endure after a disaster are the constant requests for information from many different sources.

There may be a limit to which the police can resolve this with other agencies but they can at least make sure that any requests to the family are fed through the FLO in order to avoid duplication from the police, and marking requests according to their priority.

In this way, the FLO can make sure that long periods of time are not spent on issues that can be resolved later.

The role of the FLO Coordinator can be influential in achieving this aim by prioritizing requests to the FLO.

There may be times during the investigation when the families request a meeting with the DVI Commander.

In the event of mass fatalities, the DVI Commander may be unable to see families individually, therefore it may be advantageous for the DVIC to bring the families together to be given periodic briefings, which can be arranged by the FLOs in order to meet the needs of all parties.

6.1.5 Record keeping

All communication with the family, whether by telephone or in person, must be recorded in a way that can be reproduced later for supervision and examination.

It is recommended that an FLO create a log of communications with the family which can show at a glance the history of the police–family relationship.

Any requests made by the family or concerns that have been raised should be recorded and brought to the attention of the Coordinator as soon as possible.

If for any reason the police cannot resolve the family's concerns then a full explanation should be given to the family as to why and this must be subsequently recorded in the Family Liaison Officer's log.

Copies of the FLO log should be handed to the FLO Coordinator in order that they can be submitted to the investigation and that any other actions arising from that interaction can be raised.

A separate FLO log must be completed for each family. These should be in a carbon book with one copy being returned to the investigation daily, and the other should be retained by the FLO during the investigation and handed in at the end.

6.1.6 Family and the media

The media will always have a major part to play in the aftermath of a mass fatality incident.

The 24-hour media coverage that is available now has ensured that images from the scene of a disaster can be in people's homes within minutes of it happening.

The DVI Commander will have to balance the need to use the media to generate information and intelligence with the need to protect the family from unwarranted media intrusion.

It is important therefore that any media strategy devised by the police has been discussed in advance with the family.

This will include the release of photographs, which may have been given to police by the family.

Video records showing family members should also be shown to the family first and the evidential value of releasing them to the media explained to the family.

Having a dedicated Media Officer will help take this pressure off the DVI Commander and could also assist the FLO with briefings to the family about developing issues likely to appear in the press.

The FLO, on behalf of the DVI Commander, should discourage the family from having an independent media strategy emphasizing the need for a jointly agreed strategy.

It is the responsibility of the FLO to keep the DVI Commander aware of any issues arising within the family that could cause adverse media attention.

6.1.7 Family assistance centres

In the event of a large-scale disaster where the families end up making their way to the area, it may be advisable to consider setting up a central resource centre.

This would assist police and families alike by having a focal point where relatives could attend for information and aid.

In the short term this could help to maximize the family liaison effort by having FLO resources available to capture all the ante-mortem information as well as forensic samples in the immediate aftermath.

By its very nature this type of resource would need the involvement of other agencies. However it would allow families to make informed choices about what their immediate needs were.

Trips to the scene could be organized in such a way that they did not interfere with any rescue or recovery work that was going on.

Also it would minimize the risk of relatives arriving unaccompanied at the scene, which can be harrowing and disruptive to DVI Teams working there.

Suitable premises would have to be identified that were not too near the scene but had sufficient effective transport links.

These types of facilities were used effectively in New York and London following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 11 2001 and 7 July 2005 respectively.

6.1.8 Exit strategies

The primary role of the police FLO is that of investigator.

Therefore it is necessary for all the key practitioners in the delivery of a family liaison strategy to recognize when that role is finished.

The FLO Coordinator and the DVI Commander should have no problem in identifying when this happens.

However the FLO can sometimes, if not supervised appropriately, become over involved with a bereaved family.

That is why the role of the FLO needs to be explained thoroughly to the family at the outset.

The FLO should keep the family updated in order that the family are aware that contact will eventually end.

The FLO Coordinator must be checking regularly that the exit strategy is being implemented.

Failure to do this may encourage the family to become over-dependent on the Police when their actual needs can now be met better by other non-police agencies.

It is also important that the FLO is allowed for their own benefit to step away from the family at the end of the investigation.

A well-managed, well-supervised FLO Team should not necessarily suffer any ill effects from conducting their role.

However it is essential that they be given the same access as other practitioners performing key roles with regard to debriefing.

Debriefing of officers is mandatory at the end of an incident.

This will help maintain their welfare and also draw out any operational issues that may need to be reviewed prior to any subsequent deployment.

It will also help to ensure that learning takes place within the organization every time we deal with a disaster.

7 SUMMARY

The provision of police family liaison following a disaster is essential in effectively managing the two-way flow of information.

It allows for:

- More effective media handling;
- Faster more reliable identification and repatriation;
- Better inter-agency cooperation to benefit of families and investigation;
- Family/Community/Media confidence in the work of the police.

7.1.1 Contacts database

In order to ensure high quality support to member countries, in the early days of implementation, it is recommended that the INTERPOL General Secretariat in Lyon maintain a database of individuals with recognized expertise in this area.

The database would enable access to up-to-date experience in this field, which may assist member countries.

Any Family Liaison Coordinator would therefore be able to seek advice or share recent experience with other similar practitioners.

This could enhance the role of INTERPOL in providing international assistance whilst providing member countries with an extra resource following a mass disaster.

This could also feed into the INTERPOL secure website, which could maintain a library of resource material.

As we live in an increasingly multicultural and globalized society, there are significant benefits in being able to share our combined knowledge across borders and cultures.

Every disaster impacts upon families, every disaster impacts upon communities.

It is indiscriminate in who it affects.

Managing the diverse nature of the challenges before us will be greatly enhanced by working together.