

Decedent Management during Disasters

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ASPR
ADMINISTRATION FOR STRATEGIC
PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE



TRACIE
HEALTHCARE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS
INFORMATION GATEWAY

FOREWORD

Decedent Management during Disasters

As we approach winter and the holiday season, and after making it through some of the most challenging years we have faced in recent history, ASPR would like to recognize our nation's healthcare emergency readiness and response professionals for your dedication to helping us through the pandemic and restore capabilities that were diminished during that time. Many of you dealt with personal losses while continuing to serve your communities, and we commend you for that.

While decedent management may not be the first thing we think of when we imagine healthcare emergency management, to victims' loved ones, it is possibly the most important component of the process. The [National Disaster Medical System](#) is made up of several teams of responders including [Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams](#) (DMORTs), which are deployed to supplement federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial resources at the request of local authorities. The articles in this issue focus on the role of DMORTs in recent mass casualty incidents and COVID-19; Michigan's Mortuary Response Team's COVID-19 response; and decedent management in New York City during the pandemic. We also highlight decedent management after the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde and after the Harvest Festival in Las Vegas. Regardless of their role, everyone we met with shared the same goal: ensuring decedents arrived at their final disposition with dignity.

We realize that many healthcare organizations and their respective workforces are not "out of the woods" as surges in pediatric and adult illness and supply chain issues continue to challenge providers across the country. To address these issues, I encourage you to visit ASPR TRACIE's [Disaster Available Supplies in Hospitals Tool](#), [Pediatric Surge Resources Page](#) and [Fatality Management](#) and [Family Reunification and Support](#) Topic Collections.

ASPR TRACIE develops resources in conjunction with partners, stakeholders, and other subject matter experts who have direct experience in the field. [Please share](#) your own promising practices, experiences, or requests for technical assistance so that others may learn from you. As always, we welcome your feedback.



Michael Smith

MA, MS, Director, National Disaster Medical System

WELCOME TO ISSUE 16!

The [last issue of *The Exchange*](#) focused on ethics in healthcare during disasters (with articles on general ethics and disaster healthcare; the ethical allocation of COVID-19 treatment and vaccines; crisis standards of care; and patient load balancing that can save lives). As we continue observing and collecting lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, natural and human-caused disasters persist; this issue reviews how our stakeholders managed large numbers of decedents during the pandemic and other events.

[ASPR TRACIE](#) has had the honor of working with subject matter experts (SMEs) to gather and share timely information before and throughout the pandemic. We recognize that while decedent management plans existed prior to the pandemic, recent challenges encountered by many of our stakeholders highlighted the need to revisit these plans and policies. It is our goal to develop new resources and share with you existing articles, tools, quick sheets, and templates—all vetted by SMEs—that can help you and your communities stay safe.

Please continue to refer to our [Pediatric Surge](#), [COVID-19](#), [Mpox](#), and [Countries in Conflict](#) Resource Pages. Your feedback is what makes us successful—please [contact us](#) with your comments, questions, technical assistance needs, and resources to share. We look forward to our continued collaboration.

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AT A GLANCE

- 5 **[Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams in Action: The Role of DMORT in Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Beyond](#)**
Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORTs) were created in 1992 to assist federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial entities with identifying and reuniting human remains with their loved ones after a mass casualty incident. ASPR TRACIE interviewed Dr. Patricia Kauffman who has been with DMORT since 2001 and currently serves as a team commander to understand how the role of DMORTs has changed over time. A sidebar on challenges associated with counting disaster-related deaths related to a recent National Academies of Medicine publication accompanies the article.
- 6 **[COVID-19 Decedent Management: MI-MORT in Action](#)**
The COVID-19 pandemic caused patient surges in healthcare facilities around the world, and as deaths increased many hospital morgues became overwhelmed by shortages of space and staff. ASPR TRACIE met with Jessica Gould, Linda Scott, and Lynn Sutfin from the State of Michigan to learn more about how they overcame these challenges and quickly implemented solutions for managing human remains with dignity.
- 7 **[COVID-19 Decedent Management: Experiences from New York City](#)**
During the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City was often the harbinger for the rest of the country and managing large numbers of fatalities presented a significant challenge to hospitals across the city. ASPR TRACIE met with Andrew Dahl, Jory Guttsman, and Johanna Miele, who shared how their individual hospitals, systems, and enterprises handled decedent management during the first surge in 2020 and beyond.
- 8 **[Fatality Management in Rural Areas: How One Justice of the Peace Oversaw the Uvalde Shooting](#)**
Across the U.S., Justices of the Peace have multiple duties. In Texas, while roles vary by county, Justices of the Peace also perform magistrate duties and conduct inquests into cause of death. ASPR TRACIE met with Judge Eulalio “Lalo” Diaz, Jr. to learn more about his experience as the on-call coroner on May 24, 2022, when a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers and injured 17 others in Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Dr. Kimberly Molina, Bexar County’s Chief Medical Examiner, also shared some lessons learned following their experiences with the school shooting, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an incident involving 53 immigrants who died in an 18-wheeler.
- 9 **[Fatality Management and Mass Gatherings: Looking Back at the Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting](#)**
On October 1, 2017, a gunman opened fire on more than 22,000 attendees of the Route 91 Harvest Country Music Festival in Las Vegas from a hotel room overlooking the festival. Twenty minutes later, the first of more than 200 patients began arriving at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center, a Level II trauma center with 692 adult and pediatric beds. In this article, Kathy Donovan, former Chief Operating Officer of Sunrise Children’s Hospital, and Jennifer Nieratko (ASPR TRACIE) highlight five primary fatality management lessons learned during this tragic incident. Experts from Florida provide an overview of a new family reunification and assistance center plan template in an accompanying sidebar.



WHAT'S NEW WITH ASPR?

Since its creation in 2006, ASPR has been tasked with helping the country prepare for and respond to public health emergencies (PHE) – both naturally occurring and human caused. In July 2022, in recognition of the increasing size and scope of what ASPR does, particularly over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Secretary Becerra elevated ASPR from an HHS Staff Division to an Operating Division](#), putting ASPR in the same category as other large HHS teams with core operational responsibilities (e.g., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and the National Institutes of Health). Along with this reclassification, the division was renamed the [Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response \(ASPR\)](#).

In October 2022, HHS renewed the [COVID-19 Public Health Emergency \(PHE\) Declaration](#). This renewal followed ASPR's HHS Coordination Operations and Response Element (H-CORE) working around-the-clock in June to [deliver vaccine doses for children 6 months to 5 years of age; updated COVID-19 boosters for adults were distributed](#) starting in September.

HHS renewed the [Mpox PHE](#) on November 2, 2022; the department does not expect to renew it when it expires in January 2023. ASPR's [Response to the Mpox Outbreak](#) includes the production and distribution of vaccines and ensuring testing was available throughout the U.S. The [opioid declaration was also renewed on September 29, 2022](#). Check out ASPR's [PHE overview](#) to learn more.

Pediatric providers and caregivers have been faced with several significant challenges in the past few months. A shortage in infant formula led [ASPR to arrange nearly 75 Fly Formula flights by the end of September 2022](#); this effort helped secure and deliver more than 97.9 million 8-ounce bottle equivalents of infant formula to ensure our nation's families had access to safe formula. In October, [pediatric specialists from the National Disaster Medical System deployed to provide expert patient care to children in Florida following Hurricane Ian](#). And together with federal partners, ASPR TRACIE created the [Pediatric Surge Resources Page](#) to address the current response to the pediatric surge in viral respiratory illnesses impacting hospital capacity starting in the fall of 2022.

Efforts to [strengthen the Strategic National Stockpile; counter biological threats, enhance pandemic preparedness, and achieve health security](#); [advance development and procure therapeutic for Sudan ebolavirus](#); [treat injuries and illness related to radiological and nuclear emergencies](#); and [combat biothreats and treat antibiotic resistant infections](#) are also helping ASPR lead the nation's medical and public health preparedness for, response to, and recovery from disasters and public health emergencies.

Visit the [ASPR homepage](#) and [blog](#) and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) to learn more about how we are working to keep our communities safe, healthy, and resilient.



Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams in Action: The Role of DMORT in Natural Disasters, Pandemics, and Beyond

SUMMARY

Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORT) were created in 1992 to assist federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial entities with identifying and reuniting human remains with their loved ones after a mass fatality incident. ASPR TRACIE interviewed Dr. Patricia Kauffman who has been with DMORT since 2001 and currently serves as a team commander to understand the impact of DMORTs over time.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Each human remains is assigned a personal escort throughout the Disaster Portable Morgue Units (DPMU).
- DPMUs need space (5,000-8,000 square feet), privacy, and security.
- DMORT members are “intermittent federal employees;” they become federal employees whenever activated.

RELATED ASPR TRACIE RESOURCES

- [Fatality Management](#)
- [Family Reunification and Support](#)
- [COVID-19 Fatality Management Resources](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [A Framework for Assessing Mortality and Morbidity After Large-Scale Disasters](#)
- [Preserving the Dead: Cemetery Preservation and Disaster Planning](#)
- [O.J. Fawcett, Retired Funeral Director, Helps Identify Dead in Katrina Aftermath](#)



COVID-19 Decedent Management: MI-MORT in Action

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic caused patient surges in healthcare facilities around the world, and as deaths increased many hospital morgues became overwhelmed by shortages of space and staff. ASPR TRACIE met with healthcare experts from the State of Michigan to learn more about how they overcame these challenges and quickly implemented solutions for managing human remains with dignity.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Non-traditional strategies (e.g., contracting with a livery service) can help with remains management.*
- *Consider adding medical examiners and funeral directors to health alert network system so they can plan accordingly.*
- *Storage systems (e.g., mortuary enhanced remains cooling systems) need space, loading docks, wheeled shelving, and electricity.*
- *It is important to plan for no-notice and long-term mass casualty incidents (e.g., pandemics).*

RELATED ASPR TRACIE RESOURCES

- [Fatality Management](#)
- [Family Reunification and Support](#)
- [COVID-19 Fatality Management Resources](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [Michigan Mortuary Response Team \(MI-MORT\)](#)
- [State Activates Michigan Mortuary Response Team as COVID-19 Deaths Mount](#)



COVID-19 Decedent Management: Experiences from New York City

SUMMARY

During the COVID-19 pandemic, New York City (NYC) was often the harbinger for the rest of the country and managing large numbers of fatalities presented a significant challenge to hospitals across the city. ASPR TRACIE met with healthcare experts from NYC who shared how their individual hospitals, systems, and enterprises handled decedent management during the first surge in 2020 and beyond.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *In a public health emergency, ensure you have space and a robust process for holding unclaimed decedents; it will take time and resources for some loved ones to arrange burials and funerals.*
- *Use and store hazardous material body containment pouches for a variety of pathogens.*
- *Physical therapists can teach surge staff how to appropriately leverage body mechanics and prevent injury.*

RELATED ASPR TRACIE RESOURCES

- [Fatality Management](#)
- [Family Reunification and Support](#)
- [COVID-19 Fatality Management Resources](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [Innovations in Fatality Management During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Virginia Crisis Manager Returns Home to NYC to Set up Morgues](#)
- [“We Do This for the Living.” Inside New York’s Citywide Effort to Bury Its Dead](#)



Fatality Management in Rural Areas: How One Justice of the Peace Oversaw the Uvalde School Shooting

SUMMARY

Across the U.S., Justices of the Peace have multiple duties, including presiding over landlord and tenant disputes, truancy cases, and small civil cases. In Texas, while roles vary by county, Justices of the Peace also perform magistrate duties and conduct inquests into cause of death. ASPR TRACIE met with Judge Eulalio “Lalo” Diaz, Jr. to learn more about his experience as the on-call coroner on May 24, 2022, when a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers and injured 17 others in an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. Dr. Kimberly Molina, Bexar County’s Chief Medical Examiner, also shared some lessons learned following the office’s experience with the school shooting, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an incident involving 53 immigrants who died in an 18-wheeler.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

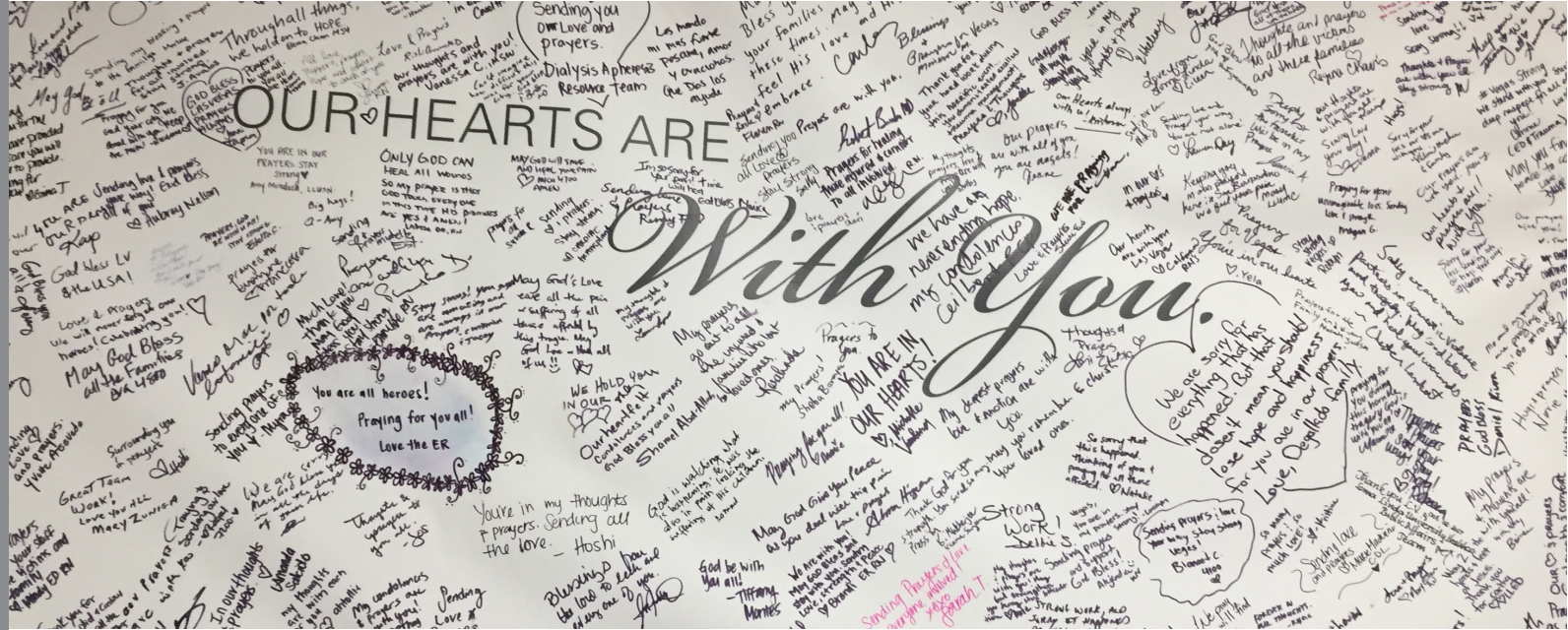
- *If a shooter is one of the fatalities, keep their body separate from the victims throughout the entire fatality management process.*
- *Ensure your tagging system is flexible and can account for a large number of fatalities.*
- *Provide staff with mental health assistance after any type of mass fatality incident.*
- *There is a significant shortage of medical examiners across the U.S.*

RELATED ASPR TRACIE RESOURCES

- [Fatality Management](#)
- [Family Reunification and Support](#)
- [Mass Violence Resource Page](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [A Uvalde Coroner is Haunted by Identifying the Bodies of Children and an Old Friend](#)
- [Bexar County Facing Medical Examiner Shortage After 2 Recent Tragedies](#)



Fatality Management and Mass Gatherings: Looking Back at the Route 91 Harvest Festival Shooting

SUMMARY

On October 1, 2017, a gunman opened fire on more than 22,000 attendees of the Route 91 Harvest Country Music Festival in Las Vegas from a hotel room overlooking the festival. Twenty minutes later, the first of more than 200 patients began arriving at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center, a Level II trauma center with 692 adult and pediatric beds. In this article, the authors highlight five primary fatality management lessons learned during this tragic incident.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Pre-identify surge morgue space in your facility.
- Prepare for delays in identification and notification of fatalities.
- Consider staff training and support needed after an incident.
- Plan to accommodate line of duty death processes.

RELATED ASPR TRACIE RESOURCES

- [Fatality Management](#) and [Family Reunification and Support](#) Topic Collections
- [Mass Violence/Active Shooter Incidents: Fatality Management](#)
- [Healthcare Response to a No-Notice Incident: Las Vegas](#)
- [Mass Violence Resource Page](#)

OTHER RESOURCES

- [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Vet Centers](#)
- [Questions Every Hospital Must Ask About Whether They're Supporting Their Non-resident/Foreign Citizen Patients](#)
- [Mass Fatality Management Guide for Healthcare Entities](#)
- [Mass Fatality Checklist](#)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES



TECHNICAL RESOURCES

Since the last issue of *The Exchange* was published, ASPR TRACIE has produced two new resource pages on [Pediatric Surge](#) and [Mpox](#). We have also refreshed numerous Topic Collections, including [Fatality Management](#), [Patient Movement and Tracking](#), [Family Reunification and Support](#), and all three specific to healthcare coalitions ([Coalition Administrative Issues](#), [Coalition Models and Functions](#), and [Coalition Response Operations](#)). We continue to maintain our 20 [COVID-19 Healthcare Planning Resource Collections](#); check back often. You can also learn more about rating, commenting on, and saving resources [in this short tutorial](#).



ASSISTANCE CENTER

We encourage you to review our recent requests for technical assistance (TA) specific to [Pediatrics and High Flow Nasal Cannulas](#), [Hospital Strain Mitigation Strategies](#), and [Pediatric Surge, COVID-19](#), and our [summary of responses to select TA requests](#). Check out [this tutorial](#) for assistance navigating the Assistance Center.



INFORMATION EXCHANGE

Check out the [COVID-19 threads in the Information Exchange](#) (IE) to access what your colleagues are sharing and provide feedback. Don't have an account? [Register for the IE today](#), where you can share your opinions and resources with us and your colleagues. [Access our quick tutorial](#) for help with registration.

ASPR TRACIE

Your Healthcare Emergency Preparedness Information Gateway

The Exchange is produced by the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response (ASPR) Technical Resources, Assistance Center, and Information Exchange (TRACIE). Through the pages of *The Exchange*, emergency health professionals share firsthand experiences, information, and resources while examining the disaster medicine, healthcare system preparedness, and public health emergency preparedness issues that are important to the field. To receive *The Exchange*, visit <https://asprtracie.hhs.gov/register> and enter your email address.

ASPR TRACIE was created to meet the information and technical assistance needs of ASPR staff, healthcare coalitions, healthcare entities, healthcare providers, emergency managers, public health practitioners, and others working in disaster medicine, healthcare system preparedness, and public health emergency preparedness. The infographic illustrates ASPR TRACIE's reach since launching in September 2015.



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