

## Key Questions to Ask when a Mass Fatality Incident Occurs

When a mass fatality incident occurs in your jurisdiction it is important to know what initial questions to ask in order to evaluate the situation and identify critical next steps, including when to call for additional help. The following are key questions every jurisdiction will need to consider if a mass fatality incident occurs in your community.

1. How many suspected fatalities are there?
2. What is the condition of the human remains? (e.g. whole or fragmented, contaminated, burned)
3. Where did the incident occur?
  - Can recovery personnel access the scene(s)?
  - Will special equipment or specialized personnel be needed to access the remains at the scene?
4. Is this an “open” or “closed” victim population?
  - Open: when the number and the identity of the victims is unknown (earthquake, metro bus accident)
  - Closed: when the number and identity of victims is known (e.g. airplane crash)
5. Based on the information above, does your Coroner or Medical Examiner have the local capacity and resources to manage these fatalities? This includes capacity and resources for:
  - Field/Scene operations: documentation, recovery and transport of human remains
  - Morgue Operations: storage, autopsy/ human remains processing, processing and storing personal effects
  - Identification: Dental identification, Body X-Ray identification, Fingerprint and/or DNA identification
  - Family Assistance: maintaining ongoing communication with families, collecting antemortem information necessary for identification and providing mental health and/or spiritual care to families and responders
6. If the local Coroner or Medical Examiner *does not* have the capacity and resources to handle these fatalities, is there mutual aid available to provide assistance to your Coroner or Medical Examiner?
7. If local and/or mutual aid resources have been exhausted or are not available, contact the State Department of Emergency Management to request assistance.

*☞ Tip: The Coroner or Medical Examiner should be notified of an incident as soon as possible! Even if they are not needed immediately at the scene, early notification will help the agency better plan and prepare for their response.*

*☞ Tip: Determining when something is a mass fatality incident is not just about the number of deaths. The condition of human remains (e.g. whole vs. fragmentary) and the nature of the incident will impact what resources the Coroner or Medical Examiner will need to respond to the event.*

*☞ Tip: Family Assistance should be an immediate part of a response! In a mass fatality incident families will have questions and may need information and assistance before the recovery process begins. Make sure there is a collection point for families and a strategy for keeping them informed about the response as soon as possible after an incident occurs. Initiating support for the families early on will help facilitate a more effective overall response.*