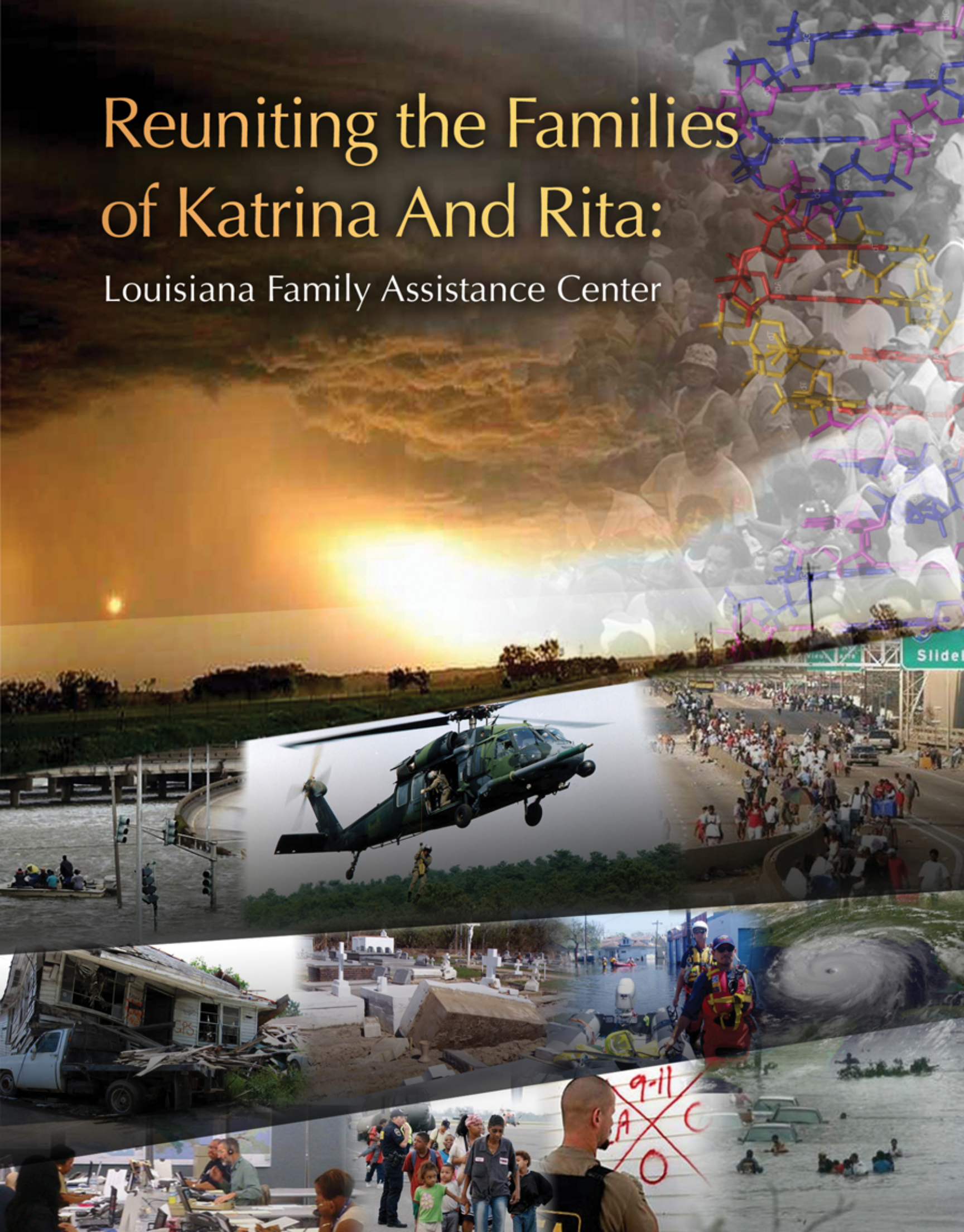


Reuniting the Families of Katrina And Rita:

Louisiana Family Assistance Center



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REUNITING THE FAMILIES OF KATRINA AND RITA: FINAL REPORT OF THE LOUISIANA FAMILY ASSISTANCE CENTER

INTRODUCTION

The devastation of the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina is often referred to as the most horrific natural disaster in our nation's history. An estimated 1.36 million residents were displaced.¹ Their journeys might have begun in hotels or shelters within driving distance of the greater New Orleans area, but eventually the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported that Katrina evacuees filed for assistance from nearly every county in every state.² It has been called the greatest mass migration in our history. Twenty-six days later, Hurricane Rita struck, sending still more south Louisiana residents, including some evacuated from Katrina's path, fleeing.

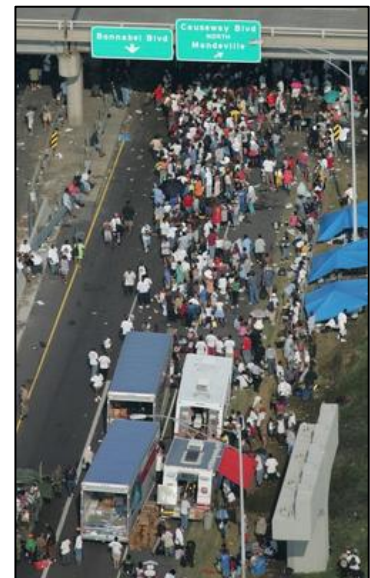
This great dispersion of residents of south Louisiana defines the immensity of the task that began on September 7, 2005 in a Baton Rouge hotel conference center.

Less than ten days before, the world watched in horror as the flooding and the storm surge of Hurricane Katrina claimed lives, destroyed property and separated families in Louisiana. More than one million people had reportedly evacuated in advance of Hurricane Katrina.

In those chaotic early days following the disaster in the greater New Orleans area, hundreds of thousands of people whose loved ones who had been living in the region began asking the same questions: where is my father ... mother ... husband ... wife ... child ... brother ... sister ... friend ... aunt ... uncle ... grandparent?

Finding those answers was an immense challenge. Reuniting the families separated by the hurricane was going to need an effort unlike any that had ever been mounted. This became the mission of the Louisiana Family Assistance Center (LFAC), which opened under the name Find Family National Call Center (FFNCC).

Gathered that first day in a hotel conference room with little more than phones, pads of legal paper and pencils, approximately 150 people began a mission that would eventually go down in history. They set out to help those in dire need not realizing at that time, they were embarking on a mission that would eventually result in arguably the greatest achievements in tracking missing persons and identifying victims of a natural disaster. Over the next 11 months, this original contingent would be



¹ http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2005/10/02/national/nationalspecial/20051002diaspora_graphic.html

² http://lagic.lsu.edu/lgisc/publications/2005/LGISC-PUB-20051116-00_2005_HURRICANE_ATLAS.pdf

joined and assisted by hundreds of staff and volunteers dedicated to reuniting the families of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The results of the work are impressive:

- 13,197 missing reports were filed
- Only 135 names remain on the LFAC's missing list (as of 8/14/06)
- 99% of the missing list has been cleared
- 910 bodies were recovered and processed through the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) morgues
- 875 recovered through the DMORT process have been identified
- 35 human remains were determined to be non-storm related deaths
- Nearly 98% of the human remains have been identified (as of 8/14/06)

The impassioned and personal focus of the workers who surmounted obstacle after obstacle in a demanding and often times gut-wrenching endeavor cannot be overemphasized. They faced conditions and circumstances vastly different from such other national disasters as the 9-11 terrorist strikes or the earthquakes in California. Even though they based their efforts on prior experiences and best practices gathered from other events, they were writing a brand new guidebook.

Always at the center of the work was one core mission: to help frightened and grieving families find out what happened to those they loved who were missing as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in Louisiana.

"The true measure of our success is whether, at the end of the day, we can truly say that we did everything in our ability to serve the citizens of Louisiana affected by this tragedy."

Arbie Goings, Baton Rouge, LFAC Director

OVERVIEW

The Louisiana Family Assistance Center (LFAC) has been the national collection point for information on separated family members or those who may have perished in Louisiana during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

The LFAC, formerly known as the Find Family National Call Center (FFNCC), initially stood up at the Baton Rouge Holiday Inn Select conference facility to meet the needs of the evacuees of Hurricane Katrina and support the State Medical Incident Commander in identifying victims of the storm. Federal assistance from the Department of Defense (DoD) and Disaster Mortuary Operations Response Teams (DMORT) assisted the State of Louisiana in establishing this capability. The Center moved to a former Jumbo Sports store located on Sherwood Forest Boulevard in October 2005 to continue efforts to search for the missing and identify the storm victims.

Slated to officially cease operations on August 14, 2006, the LFAC was a joint effort between the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, the Louisiana State Police and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. LFAC operated under the direction and medical oversight of Louis Cataldie, M.D., State Medical Examiner and the Medical Incident Commander.

“Work we do here will be felt for the next three generations. I know people will never forget how they were treated. We have worked tirelessly to help and to listen.”

Jim Gumm, Baton Rouge, LFAC Development and Training

The LFAC’s mission has been to 1) reunify loved ones with the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; 2) assist in the identification of the missing; and 3) support the re-interment of the displaced victims from public cemeteries. All information that was gathered by the LFAC was used strictly to locate the missing, identify the victims of the storms, and reunite them with their families.

Staffed by professionals experienced in forensic medicine, genetics, mental health, pathology and Internet technology along with volunteer chaplains, mortuary specialists and call center specialists, the LFAC took in all official reports of the missing, assisted in the identification of the recovered storm victims, assisted and supported distraught and grieving families of the missing and deceased, utilized advanced DNA technology to provided scientific information to the Medical Incident Commander to aid in identification of a significant number of remains, mounted sophisticated Internet searches to locate the missing who were alive but separated from loved ones, and assisted families with burial arrangements for the deceased.

Based on projections from the 2004 Hurricane Pam disaster preparedness exercise, officials initially anticipated more than 60,000 deaths from Hurricane Katrina³. Although the final death toll may change as further determinations are made on cases generated through parish-level and out-of-state coroners not involved in the official DMORT process, the Louisiana death toll now stands at 1,464.

Of the 910 remains processed at the DMORT facilities, 875 have been identified as storm-related victims. As the work to identify the deceased continues beyond the LFAC closure, the remains of 23

³ http://www.nola.com/newslogs/breakingtp/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_Times-Picayune/archives/2005_09_09.html#078509

individuals have not been identified. This does not include the number of unidentified remains collected by the Orleans Parish Coroner.

Dr. Cataldie and other disaster specialists involved in LFAC operations initially estimated that at least 500 individuals on the official missing list would never be found. However, of the ~13,200 missing cases taken in and exhaustively searched by the LFAC, there are only 135 whose whereabouts have not been determined. Despite the unprecedented success of the LFAC in locating 99% of the reported missing, work must continue to find and reunite the remaining 1% still missing.

The LFAC has exhausted all available leads to locate the missing, but in doing so has significantly reduced the number still missing. The local law enforcement agencies in the jurisdiction where the missing person had resided before the hurricanes are now best positioned to carry on this important mission and all open cases were transferred beginning Aug. 1, 2006. Local law enforcement agencies are now more likely to locate the missing who may once again be living in the area or possibly through law enforcement resources not available to the LFAC staff.

Reflecting on the accomplishments of the LFAC, it is evident that the Center became more than a collection place of names and vital statistics ... it also became a collection place of the most intimate stories of a region torn apart by crisis. Those who took reports and mounted searches for the missing were a lifeline and a resource for people facing rebuilding their lives and unable to focus beyond the most immediate needs of survival for months. When they turned to the LFAC for help, along with the vital statistics needed to search for the missing person, callers so often found a sympathetic person who listened to tales of intricate personal relationships, anger, grief, helplessness, hope and familial estrangements.

LFAC investigators faced the difficulty of tracking down evacuees who moved several times, often getting “lost” along the way when their telephone numbers were changed or disconnected. Evacuees also lost phone numbers of loved ones, washed away in Katrina and Rita’s waters. One national newspaper characterized it this way: “Lives not lost but disconnected.” (*New York Times*, 3/1/06)

The Search For The Missing

Calls to the LFAC were answered by Volunteers of America (VOA) - Louisiana Spirit counseling staff. Each was trained to provide sensitive, confidential assistance. Callers were asked to provide as much identifying information as possible on their loved ones, such as doctor’s and dentist’s names, physical description, prior surgeries, dental work, joint replacements and unique characteristics such as tattoos, scars or birthmarks. This information was collected and entered into the Victim Identification Profile (VIP) database, created by FEMA’s Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT), for use in the investigation / identification process. Due to the complexities of this mission, the VIP was modified to be cohesive with common law enforcement missing person registries, such as the National Criminal Information Center (NCIC) database.

Investigators used the Internet, tapping into databases and search engines to find evidence of a new location and contact information for the missing person. With more experience, they developed the knack to form “hunches” that often lead them down an unexpected path to find one of the missing that had not been found yet. They were also able to coordinate with federal, state and local law enforcement agencies across the country to gather more leads on the missing. All information that was gathered by the LFAC was held in the strictest confidence and used only to locate the missing and identify the deceased in order to reunite the families. Finding the reported missing helped the LFAC

reduce the list of missing in order to focus available resources (i.e., DNA analysis) on those most likely to be truly missing.

When a missing person was found alive, LFAC's Web Search/Lead Investigation (WS/LI) or someone from the Call Center section worked to reunite them with their loved ones. In all cases, the staff followed the wishes of the individual found concerning any notifications made to family or friends.

Identifying The Victims

Respect and compassion for the victims guided the handling of the human remains in the mortuary operations process. Until identified, human remains were placed in a refrigerated environment. In keeping with the tradition established during 9-11 in New York City, all remains were blessed by clergy each day. In addition, arrangements were made to have a chaplain with the Victims Relief Ministries present for the recovery of remains.

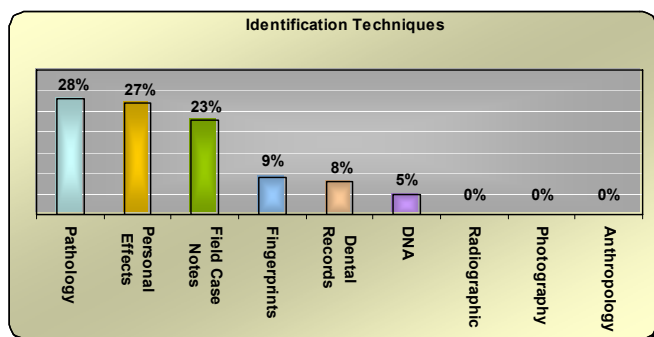
Conditions of the storm made the identification of human remains complex. Recovery operations were conducted for nearly a year; therefore, effecting the state of preservation among the human remains. It is important to note that the state of preservation can limit the methods available for identification (i.e., fingerprints).

"When I first saw New Orleans, the first thing that struck me was how quiet it was. There was no noise – no people, no birds, no animals, nothing. It was just grey and quiet."

Tracy Walsh, Seattle, DMORT and Call Center

Finding information to match physical traits found on the human remains was extremely hard to come by as most dental and doctor offices were flooded, destroying most patient records. However, some dental x-rays were recovered by DMORT dentists and taken to the temporary morgue facility in St. Gabriel.

The LFAC used forensic anthropologists and dentists at hand to assist in making positive identifications of the deceased. They accomplished this through comparison of x-rays and other medical records with the remains. Many other identifying techniques such as examining fingerprints and personal effects have also been used. The chart below outlines the percent of identifications that have been made due to various different forensic techniques. In most cases, several techniques are necessary to confirm an identity.



When all other means of identification of remains were exhausted, DNA analysis was employed. The DNA work did not begin until late December, delayed until federal funding was secured and contracts with appropriate laboratories and analysts were granted. The majority of the analysis was Kinship DNA, a much more complicated process than forensic DNA analysis. Genetics counselors volunteered from several renowned institutions to aid this

process, researching and producing the family pedigree for each possible victim's family members.

After obtaining DNA from appropriate family members, the DNA was compared to unidentified remains. If there were no available close relatives, more advanced DNA testing was utilized, such as

mitochondrial testing. Under the direction of Dr. Amanda Sozer and Tammy Pruet Northrup, the DNA section was instrumental in aiding in the identification of more than 150 individuals.

Early on, a significant number of family members did not want to fill out a Victim Identification Profile or supply DNA for kinship matches. Their reasoning was simple: they felt doing so meant they'd given up hope of finding their loved one alive. LFAC counselors worked with families to aid them in reaching the decision they were most comfortable with so that all appropriate steps could be taken to find their loved one.

When an individual was located and positively identified as a storm victim, LFAC Family Affairs served as a liaison between the family, the coroner's office and the selected funeral home to coordinate the release of the remains from the coroner to the funeral home. Throughout the process, emotional and spiritual support was provided to the families by the chaplains of the Victim Relief Ministries (VRM) and grief counselors, social workers, and funeral directors working at the LFAC.

Remains were not released until the person's identity was confirmed beyond any reasonable doubt by the State Medical Examiner or local coroner. Presumptive and tentative identifications are working hypotheses and are therefore subject to change. Out of respect for the emotional impact on families, no presumptive identifications were shared because loved ones would likely find it more painful to be told of a presumptive identification and then be asked to wait for a confirmed positive identification.

Concluding LFAC Operations

The exhaustive effort to search for the missing has touched countless lives. For families who learned their loved one had been among the victims, even in loss there was some comfort to finding out what happened to their loved ones. For the missing found alive, there are countless stories of joy and gratitude.

For the people who labored in the search for the missing and the identification of the deceased, it has been a road they will look back upon and know they made a tremendous difference to the people of Louisiana in a time of great crisis.

"This isn't like regular work. When you go home after work, you've accomplished something. When I go home, I get to say, 'I found someone. I put a family back together.'"

Melissa Austin, Walker, La., LFAC Web Search

Clearly, the effort by the people of the LFAC greatly exceeded anyone's expectations. The decision to transition operations of the LFAC to the local authorities was reached precisely because the efforts achieved so much. The realization was that with every lead available to the LFAC exhausted on the

remaining missing, it was appropriate to draw this unprecedented center of operations to a close and transition these activities to local authorities.

Through DHH, LSP, the local parish coroners and local law enforcement agencies who will take over the open case files, the work will continue to identify the deceased as well as to find the missing. Local law enforcement agencies are ready and now best positioned to assume this important responsibility. As an example, within days of receiving the open missing person case files, the Gretna Police Department were able to resolve a case due to their familiarity with local residents and detailed knowledge of their community.

Note: According to the DHH website, there have been 1,464 deceased victims of Hurricane Katrina from Louisiana. Not all victims of Hurricanes Katrina were recovered, processed and identified through the DMORT morgues. Through DMORT, 910 bodies were examined at two locations: the temporary morgue in St. Gabriel and the Victim

Identification Center in Carville. Of those, 35 were not storm-related, leaving 875 deceased who were processed through DMORT under the State Medical Examiner. Following the closure of the Carville facility, the Orleans Parish Coroner continued to recover remains in New Orleans. Parish coroners in Louisiana reported 223 deaths as storm-related. Coroners in other states reported 347 deaths as storm-related. The statistics for the Parish and out-of-state coroners are for deaths that occurred between Aug. 27 and Oct. 1, 2005, as well as for deaths that occurred outside that time frame that may be storm-related. In each case, those death certificates will be reviewed by DHH's Office of Public Health staff before a definitive determination as a hurricane-related death is made. Therefore, the total number of deaths attributed to Hurricane Katrina from Louisiana is likely to be revised.

PERSPECTIVE ON THE OUTCOMES

Taking the lessons learned from the 9-11 terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania, LFAC was established using victim assistance best practices and DoD instructions for establishing and operating a family assistance organization. However at nearly every turn, officials would realize that Katrina presented an unprecedented set of problems as well as challenges never experienced before -- one of the greatest being the massive population displacement.

In 9-11, there were distinct locations directly impacted by the events of that day: four planes, office buildings in New York and Washington D.C. and an open field in Pennsylvania. In each case, authorities had some starting point in identifying those missing and dead. The airlines had names of those on the planes, families knew if loved ones worked in specific buildings or lived in the impacted areas.



Families were able to contact authorities to list a loved one as missing, and could leave a contact phone number for further information because communication systems remained mostly intact. In most cases, one family member died and his or her belongings were found intact in their home, which could lead to DNA identification easily. Those killed often left behind a spouse, a sibling or parents who could provide helpful information, such as the person's doctor or dentist. Medical files were in tact and could be used to further identify the dead.

In Katrina, the problems in identifying the missing and dead seemed insurmountable in the first weeks.

In comparison to 9-11, the road traveled after the hurricane was vastly different.

It wasn't until Saturday morning, Aug. 27th that residents of south Louisiana learned the region would not escape Katrina and that it was the storm they'd always feared. Evacuations happened and quickly, with over a million people evacuating in 36 hours. For those who stayed behind, either by choice or because they had no transportation, there was little they could do except buy supplies and hunker down.

Once Katrina hit and the levees broke, tens of thousands of people started moving around the city desperately seeking dry ground. Some died in the process, so bodies recovered could have been the remains of residents who didn't live in the area they were found. Others were swept from their places of refuge – homes or other buildings – by the force of the flood waters and storm surge. Some, it is

felt, will never be found as they may have been washed into Lake Pontchartrain or the swamps when the flood waters receded.

For those rescued by helicopter or boat, and for those who were in the Superdome or the Convention Center, evacuation took days and involved several stops. Many went from the rooftop of their home, to the interstate, then to the airport and then on a plane. It wasn't until the plane was in the air that the evacuees would learn where they were going, and even then, that was not the final destination for tens of thousands.

Weeks went by before evacuees could even start looking for loved ones because there was no way to communicate and they often did not know where to start looking. There were so many lists for the missing, the found, the seeking – from media to Red Cross to Craig's List – that many seekers grew confused about whether they had officially registered a loved one as a missing person. The "official" list began ten days after the storm when the FFNCC, now LFAC, was opened.

Because of the flood waters, it would be nearly a month before searches for remains could even begin in some areas of the city. And then Hurricane Rita hit, causing more flooding. Bodies found were already in badly decomposed states due to contaminated flood waters. Heat and humidity were also enemies of identifying victims. Fingerprints, scars, tattoos and other such identifying marks on bodies were lost to these elements. Within months, newly recovered bodies had largely been reduced to skeletal remains. Bodies were often washed far from their homes. Personal effects, such as wallets, were often swept from the bodies in the floods.

One of the most difficult hurdles for LFAC was locating next of kin. With hundreds of thousands of evacuees moving about, living in shelters and hotels around the country, communication was difficult at best. Because so many evacuees lost cell phones and those who had them found service spotty at best, calling and making follow-up calls proved to be an impossibly grave challenge. LFAC's only hope in some cases was that a family member would sporadically check in with LFAC.

Identifying the dead proved challenging as well. With the next of kin scattered about the country and no DNA samples available from the belongings of the deceased, identifying those who perished would take months. To date, there are still 23 human remains yet to be identified.

The normal personal effects (e.g. driver's license, birth certificate, social security cards) are not available due to the flooding. In addition, the flooding caused the loss of referent DNA materials. Consider that after the Twin Towers collapsed in the aftermath of 9-11, investigators could go to the individual victim's residence and collect a toothbrush, hairbrush or other item with the victim's DNA material on it to compare against remains that were recovered and identify the victim.

This was not the case in New Orleans, where over 80% of the city was underwater. Most of the personal effects had been washed away or contaminated in the flood and storm surge. So in addition to the normal contacts needed to identify a person, mission parameters included locating up to five close family members for each individual to make a positive DNA identification. This also proved to be a challenge, because investigators frequently were unable to locate and contact friends and family because of the diaspora of evacuees.

Just as the LFAC was built on the best practices learned in the 9-11 disaster, the LFAC's efforts and lessons should be used by those communities who may face mass disasters, especially those that carry

"These people we work with have had multiple tragedies – they've lost a life, lost their home, lost their job, lost their community. And America, in its heart, hasn't realized this yet."

Edward Smith, Dallas, Victim Relief Ministries

the need to find the missing and identify the deceased. What has been learned and accomplished by the LFAC will improve disaster recovery efforts and serves as the new benchmark.

What follows are among the most critical lessons learned to enhance mass disaster recovery:

- ***The pre-planning for FAC concepts of operations should address multiple hazards and a variety of contingencies and operating concepts.*** A one-size-fits-all program is generally ineffective and creates unnecessary frustration for workers and victims. Careful consideration needs to be given to the development of this very complex FAC issue.
- ***In the future for events of catastrophic fatalities, a robust software program capable of handling ante- and post-mortem record management for tracking missing persons and identifying remains is essential.*** Improving the interoperability of electronic media will greatly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of victim support services.
- ***Experienced, trained staff in key senior positions is indispensable in quickly establishing the center and ensuring the center's success.*** The Center will mostly be staffed by volunteers, temporary staff and local government personnel likely to have little or no previous disaster assistance experience. Experienced supervisory personnel are needed to organize and train this valuable resource.
- ***A communication outreach strategy is essential and must be enacted immediately following a disaster.*** It is vital that the public receive the information needed to understand what victim support services are available and how assistance may be obtained. It is equally important that this information reach the spectrum of impacted people.
- ***Interagency cooperation and sharing of information is crucial.*** Agreements between agencies to share information must be put in place prior to the disaster event and specifically address what information is needed and how it will be shared.
- ***Involve stakeholder agencies in the missing person activities as early as possible.*** Initial involvement by these agencies is essential in the search for missing persons in order to utilize all available resources and establish strong working relationships before final transition of responsibility.
- ***The emotional health of the FAC staff must be addressed.*** It is easy to understand the need to address the psychological health of the disaster victims, but the staffs that deal with the grief on a daily basis are also vulnerable. A proactive approach should be taken to address employee stress – morale should be monitored and maintained in a coordinated effort.

STATISTICS

Below are among the major statistics regarding the LFAC mission.

The reported missing:

- 13,197 missing person reports were taken in by LFAC
 - 10,746 found were alive
 - 820 were confirmed as victims of the storms
 - 1,496 were referred to other jurisdictions (primarily Mississippi, Alabama, Texas) or were classified as non-storm related
 - 135 cases are unresolved
- 13,060 missing cases were resolved, which is a rate of more than 99%

The deceased:

- 1,464 victims perished as result of Hurricane Katrina (according to DHH website)
 - 875 victims examined through the DMORT morgue facilities were determined by the State Medical Commander to be storm-related deaths
 - 20 bodies were recovered in New Orleans by the Orleans Parish Coroner following the closure of the Carville facility
 - 223 deaths were reported as storm-related by Parish coroners in Louisiana
 - 346 deaths were reported as storm-related by coroners in other states
- 910 bodies were recovered and examined in the wake of the storms at the DMORT locations (the temporary morgue in St. Gabriel and the Victim Identification Center in Carville)
 - 875 of the victims were examined have been identified, which is a rate of nearly 98%
 - 35 bodies examined at DMORT facilities were found to be non-storm related deaths
- Hurricane Rita Victims: One fatality was directly attributed in Louisiana to Hurricane Rita

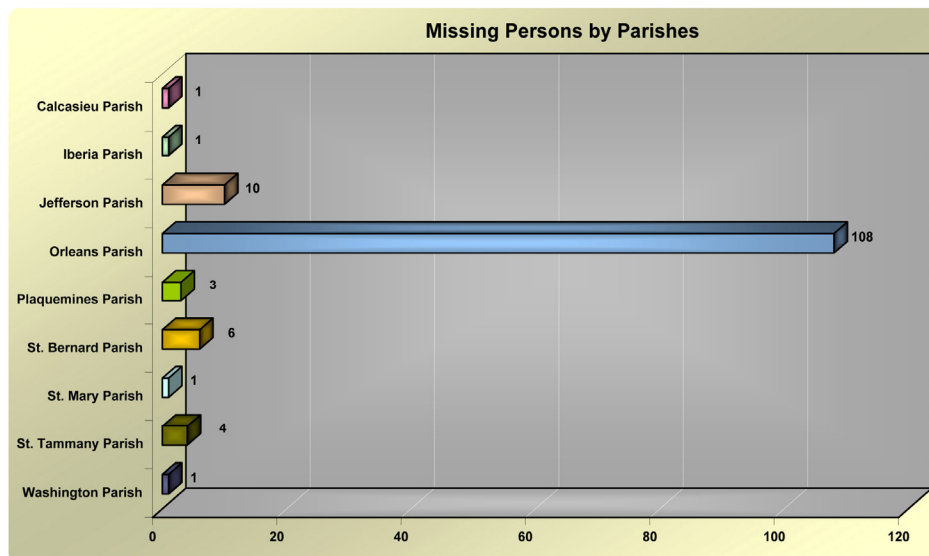
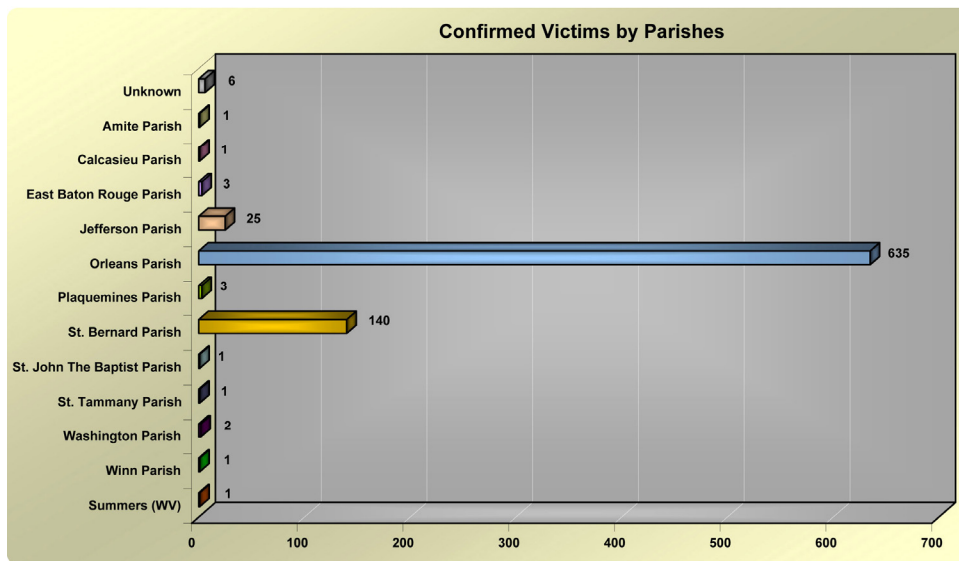
Other important statistics:

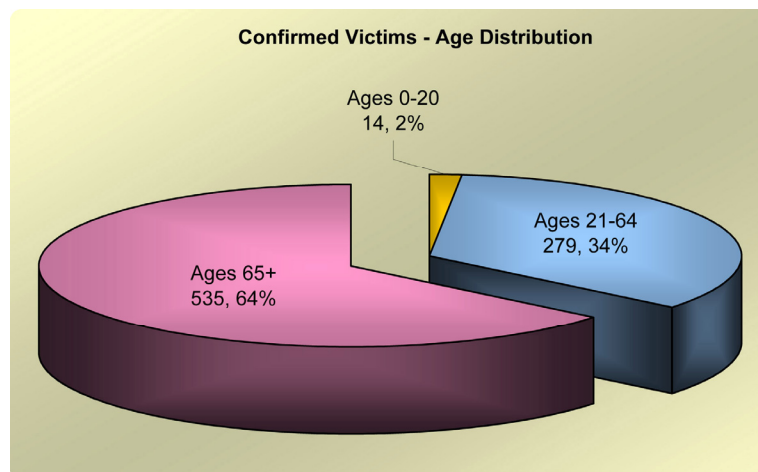
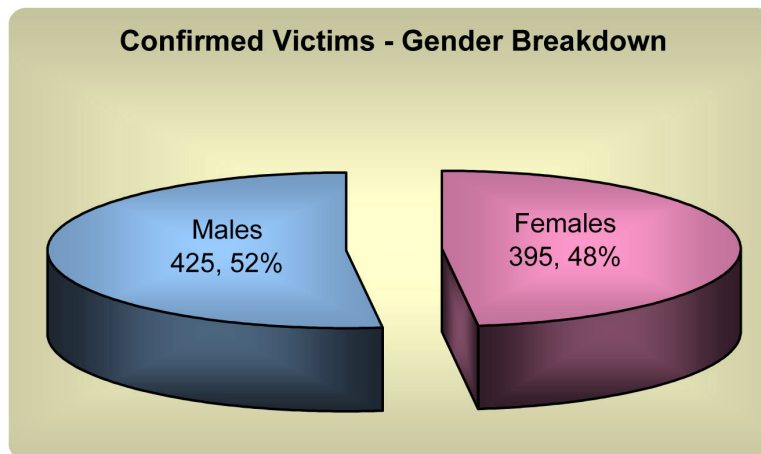
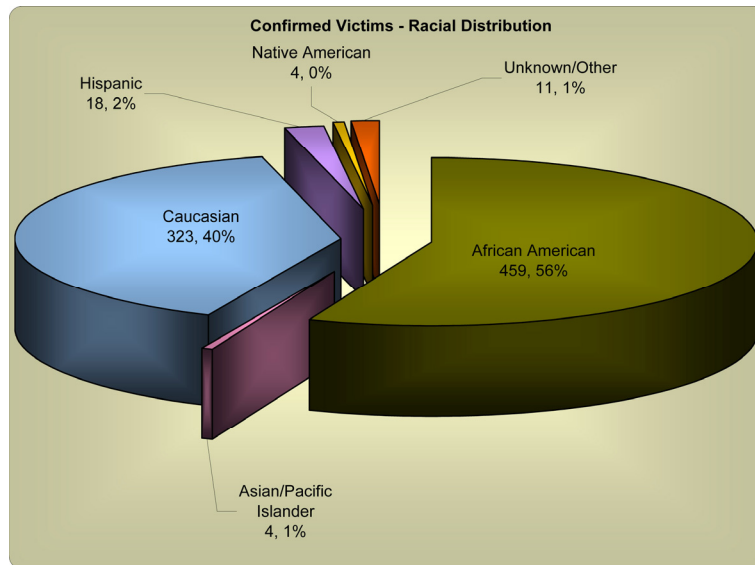
- Through LFAC's efforts in locating missing persons, \$7.2 million in tax funds were saved that might otherwise have been needed for wide-scale DNA testing of victim's families to aid in identification of remains.
- Call Center staff received more than 52,000 inbound calls
- The staff made over 163,000 outbound calls as part of the investigation process
- 1,450 vaults or tombs in 68 cemeteries in nine parishes were disinterred or damaged as a result of both hurricanes
- 82 cemeteries in nine Louisiana parishes covering 7,727 square miles, which is an area larger than the state of New Jersey, were surveyed to document disinterred or damaged vaults
- In excess of 105,000 pages of cemetery survey material were converted into digital format to aid and guide future re-internment efforts

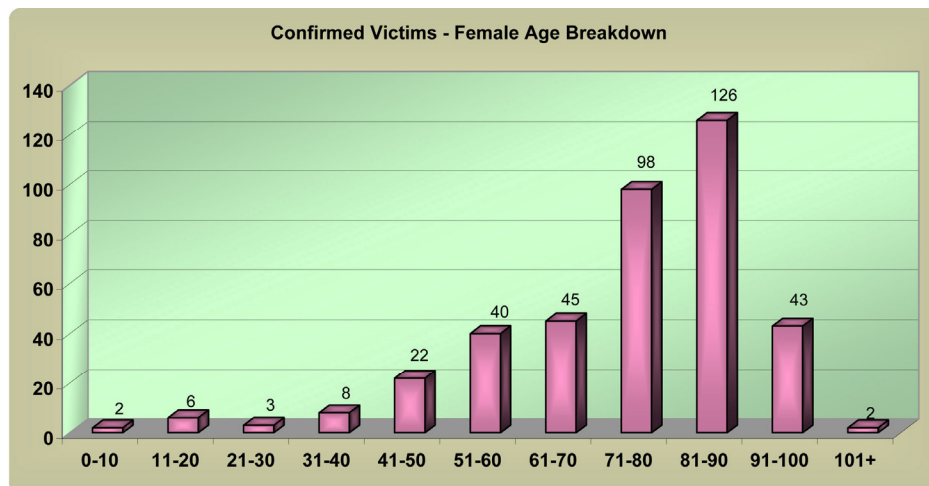
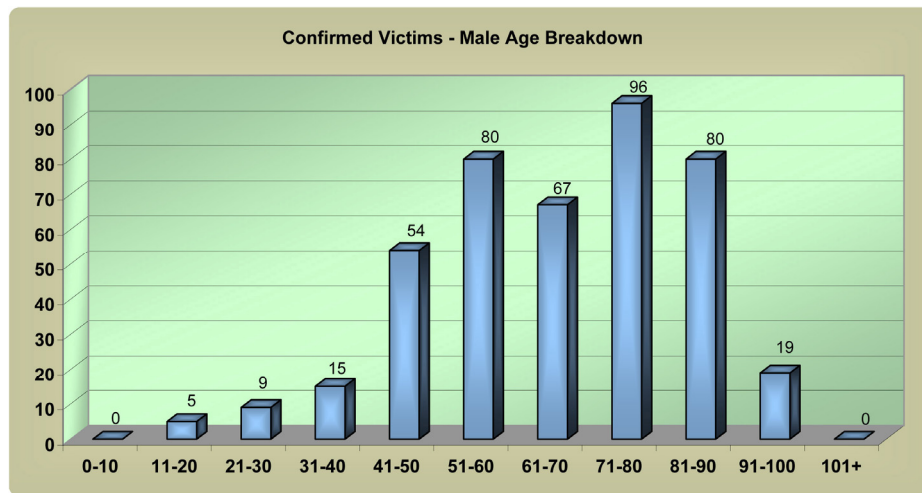
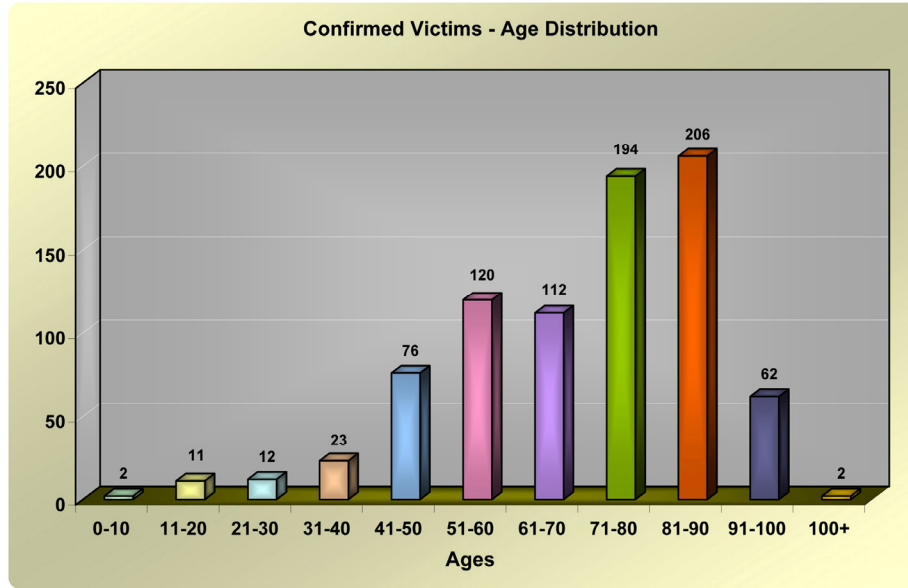
- More than 400 volunteers from around the country but primarily from Baton Rouge worked in the LFAC
- The 910 post-mortem files total approximately 63,700 pages (all have been scanned into digitized format)
- In the 910 post-mortem files are approximately 1,100 dental charts, 158 dental records and 33,000 images (all have been digitized)

CHARTS

The following statistical charts are based on the 820 missing persons reported to the LFAC who have been identified as deceased and the 135 remaining open missing person cases. These statistics do not reflect the total number of deceased or identified. Some statistics are not available for confirmed victims.

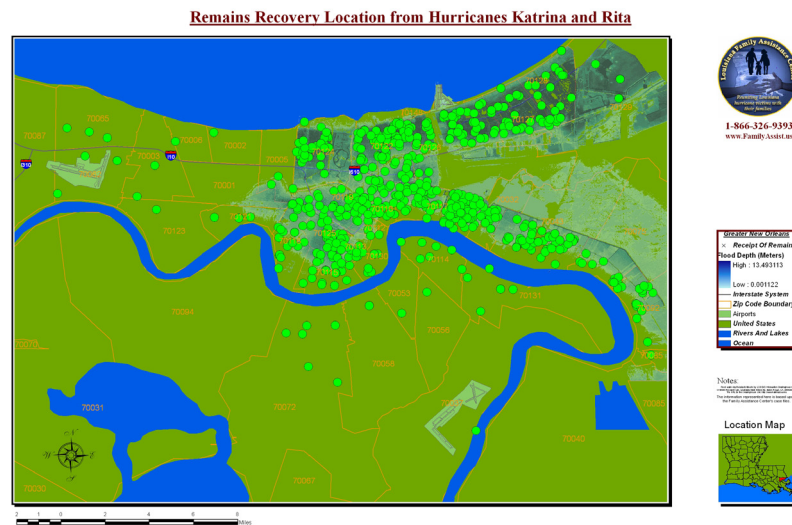




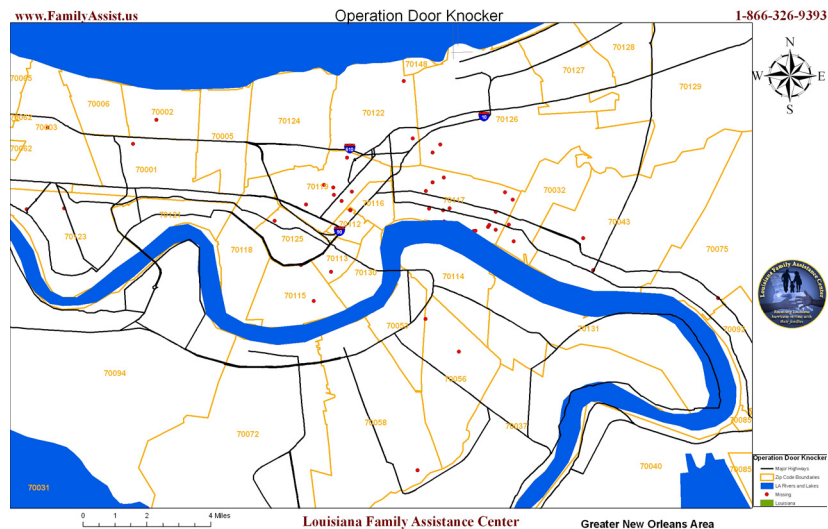


MAPS

Geospatial information systems (GIS) and geographical tools assisted in creating a visual representation of the Katrina impacted area with relation to the last known location of the reported missing, found alive, and confirmed victims. These tools helped in the search for the missing by helping to create a map representing the reported location of the missing, where remains were recovered and water depth. These GIS tools and data were used to generate maps and an interactive map for the FamilyAssist website.



The maps that were generated using these tools were also essential for the effective organization of the addresses searched for Operation Doorknocker.



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KEY COMPONENTS OF THE LOUISIANA FAMILY ASSISTANCE CENTER

When a call to the toll free help number was received at the LFAC, it triggered an organized and compassionate process to help find the missing and to help identify the deceased so that the families of the hurricanes could be reunited. Most staff would say it was emotionally demanding work, but also uplifting to be a part of a process that helped someone find out what had happened to a loved one, even if the news was that they were among the deceased.

“This has been the most uplifting, spiritual thing I’ve ever done.”

Randy Courville, Lafayette, LFAC Help Desk

Victim Identification Process

Callers to the LFAC were asked to provide any available information to be entered into the VIP database about their missing loved ones, which could include, but is not limited to the following:

- Identifying information such as full name, pre-storm address, date of birth and family members
- A physical description
- Doctors’ and dentists’ names
- A medical history, including any dental work or joint replacements
- Unique characteristics like tattoos, scars and birthmarks

Family members were often asked to sign release forms to allow for the release of the missing person’s dental or medical records, as they were particularly useful in identifying the deceased. They may have been asked for detailed family histories to create the family pedigrees that assist with kinship DNA analysis. They may also have been asked to give a DNA sample for analysis, which is as simple as a cotton swab in the mouth. The health professionals, staff and volunteers at the LFAC were trained to provide sensitive, confidential assistance. All information gathered by the LFAC has always been held in the strictest confidence and used only for the purpose of identifying and reuniting family members.

With this information, the LFAC could:

- Coordinate with federal agencies, such as FEMA, United States Postal Service (USPS), Social Security Administration (SSA), Centers for Medicaid/Medicare (CMS) and NCIC
- Coordinate with NGOs and organizations, such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), American Red Cross (ARC), Salvation Army, Louisiana Nursing Home Association and others, to find missing persons.
- Search databases. The LFAC had access to sophisticated software capable of performing complex matching of data through approximately 10 databases to help locate and identify missing individuals and to reunite them with family.
- Gather forensic information. The LFAC worked with the State Medical Examiner to identify the remains of those who died during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita but had not been

identified. Remains could be identified using fingerprints, x-rays and dental records. However, DNA analysis was also used when all other means were exhausted.

Call Center / Help Desk

The Call Center, which handled over 53,000 inbound calls and over 164,000 outbound calls, was the front line for information intake from families reporting loved ones missing. It provided the critical link between the LFAC and victim families by comforting and supporting them.

An incoming phone call was answered by an Intake Specialist who determined the caller was making a report of an individual still missing from Hurricanes Katrina or Rita or was calling to get a status report on a previously filed missing report. If the call met those parameters, the call was transferred to a Victim Information Profile Specialist (VOA - Louisiana Spirit), who conducted an in-depth and confidential interview. During the phone interview with the caller, the staffer completed an eight-page form called the Victim Identification Profile. Information gathered in this document was used by virtually every other section within the LFAC in their work to identify and reunite the missing with their families.

If the caller needed help or information beyond the scope of any staffer, he/she was transferred to the Help Desk for assistance. The Help Desk handled distressed callers, answered incoming emails to the LFAC and communicated with the parish fire departments for house searches.

“Something good did come out of Katrina. I found a sister I’ve been looking for years for and it took a disaster to find her. The people at the Family Assistance Center hadn’t given up, so I didn’t give up either.”

Brenda W., Mississippi, who was reunited with her birth sibling after LFAC staff tracked the sister through moves in three states over seven months after Katrina

Web Search / Lead Investigation



The Web Search / Lead Investigation (WS/LI) section performed thousands of searches using numerous resources, including Internet web searches, phone calls and mailings. The WS/LI section worked in conjunction with the Louisiana State Police, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the National Center for Missing Adults (NCMA), which yielded leads that resulted in a recovery rate for missing persons unprecedented in police history. With diligence, commitment and innovation, they utilized

over 100 public, open sources as well as commercial restricted-access sites and databases to locate reported missing persons. In addition to finding these missing persons to reunite them with loved ones, they also located relatives needed to obtain DNA samples and information essential to the positive identification of remains so that the storm’s deceased victims may also be reunited with their family members.



The information from the VIP document was used by staffers to locate the missing who, for whatever reason, had not been in contact with their families following the storms. When a positive identification was made of a missing person found alive, notification to the individual making the initial report was only done with the approval of the previously missing person.

Data Management

Data entry clerks transcribed the data from the VIP document into a database that was used in the identification process. This section had the responsibility to accurately maintain approximately 13,200 paper- and computer-based files on missing and deceased persons despite the challenge of constantly changing information that must be added to the files. The team also maintained the 910 State Medical Examiner and Coroner morgue files. As part of the transition, all 910 files were scanned into a digital format. Each file was copied to a CD to accompany the original file, along with another CD containing digitized x-rays and photos.

Forensic Identification Unit

This section consisted of forensic pathologists, forensic dentists, DNA specialists, forensic anthropologists, law enforcement and medical-legal investigators who compared post-mortem physical features, personal effects and field information with ante-mortem data from the VIP database and conducted intensive investigations until a presumptive identification was sufficiently and forensically conclusive to warrant presenting the information to the State Medical Examiner or Parish Coroner for review and potential approval. Forensic Identification personnel also worked directly with missing persons' families as well as a wide variety of outside sources, including private companies, State and Federal agencies, area businesses and professionals to obtain the necessary information that helped lead to identifications. This included the U.S. Department of State to identify foreign visitors. When requested by victims' families, the Forensic Identification section personally explained the exhaustive process that led to the identification of the victims.

DNA Collection and Analysis

When all other means to identify victims had been exhausted, Kinship DNA analysis was used to assist in the identification. When missing loved ones had not been found alive, their families were asked to provide a DNA sample. To decide which family members may have been best to provide the sample, the DNA section's Geneticists assisted by mapping out the family tree.

Because the vast majority of personal items (such as toothbrushes or hairbrushes) that may contain the missing person's DNA were contaminated by floodwaters from the hurricanes, it was usually necessary to collect DNA samples from blood relatives or prior medical specimens from the victim. The ability to match victims to their relatives depended on how closely related they are to the victim. To identify the remains of a victim, DNA from the human remains found in the disaster area were compared to DNA suspected to be from the victim or the victim's blood relatives.

Some family members came to the LFAC, which was equipped to take a sample by swabbing the inside of the person's mouth with a Q-tip (a buccal swab). There was no need to draw blood for these samples. For those not in the Baton Rouge area, DHH set up a system to collect samples from anywhere in the world.

Because Kinship DNA analysis is very different from Forensic DNA analysis, it takes quite a bit longer to get definitive results. Depending on the relationship to the missing person and the availability of family members who provided samples, the testing and analysis sometimes took months.

Using experience gained in DNA analysis of human remains after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, epidemiologists and genetic counselors from Johns Hopkins University and the National Institute of Health worked as volunteers to the DNA unit with the complex task of collecting data on family history, a key step in the complex system of DNA testing that state officials used to match the deceased to some of the families of those who were listed as missing from the disaster.

Kinship DNA testing led to the identification of about 150 victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. For each family, reunification with their loved one's remains meant they could begin to accept and adjust to their loss. For those for whom the testing did not lead to identification of a missing loved one, it could lead to disappointment and additional grief. That was why it was important throughout the process that each family was supported through counselors and emotional support provided by the VRM chaplains.

Family Affairs

Family Affairs had the responsibility to make the initial family notification when each storm victim was positively identified. The Family Affairs section coordinated the release of the remains between the family, coroner's office and a selected funeral home. If the death was determined to be storm related, FEMA provided Funeral Assistance Funds to assist the family with the cost of the funeral. Family Affairs staff advocated for and helped the families file for financial aid through FEMA to cover funeral expenses.

The counselors also provided families the emotional support needed to begin grief recovery. They assisted the State Medical Examiner, parish coroners and funeral homes throughout the state to ensure the timely release of nearly 900 victims from coroners' offices. To improve disaster recovery response across the United States, the Family Affairs team developed a comprehensive operations protocol covering all facets of Family Affairs operations.

"You never let me give up. The thing that I appreciate about your service is that you were genuine and you took the time with people like me to listen and hear my story. It's very painful to have a loved one missing, but you were patient. You treated me like I was the first person you had talked to and made me feel you cared about my case. Each time I called, people would comfort me."

Martha C., Atlanta, searching for her cousin and family who escaped the rising waters in New Orleans' Ninth Ward

Family Support

Family Support, staffed by Victim Relief Ministries (VRM), provided grief counseling to victim families, first responders and LFAC staff alike. The chaplains also gave comfort to families searching for the missing. They served as the public face of the recovery effort by rendering spiritual honors when a victim was recovered in the ruins of New Orleans and other parishes. In addition to their work at DMORT's Victim Identification Center in Carville until its closure in March as well as continued work in the LFAC facility in Baton Rouge, the family support chaplains maintained a continuous presence in the most heavily disaster-stricken areas of New Orleans: Lakeview and the Lower 9th

Ward. They arranged follow-up counseling for victim families living in numerous cities such as Houston, Dallas and Atlanta, where many evacuees had settled.

Re-internment / Cemeteries



Storm surges from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita disinterred or damaged caskets, vaults and tombs. The Cemetery Affairs section surveyed 82 cemeteries in 9 Louisiana parishes. This area covered 7,727 square miles (an area larger than the state of New Jersey). Damage in 68 of the surveyed cemeteries resulted in documented damage to 924 tombs and 598 vaults. Calculated cost of repair was \$4.1 million, far exceeding the initial projections. Their cemetery assessment was used for decision-making at the highest level of state

and federal government. To lay the ground work for any future cemetery recovery efforts by local, state, or federal agencies, they converted in excess of 105,000 pages of cemetery survey material into digital format.

Information Technology

The IT section used the DMORT VIP database to collect ante-mortem information on reported missing persons. This information was shared with the Victim Identification Center for the comparison with the post-mortem data to assist in victim identifications. The VIP ante-mortem database also documented all WS/LI activities as well as communications between the LFAC and the contacts of the reported missing. The data collected in the VIP database was used to generate statistical reports for numerous agencies on a daily basis and as requested.

Using lessons learned gathered from the use of DMORT's VIP database for ante-mortem records management, the IT section worked with a contractor to develop software to more effectively track the large amount of data stored in an ante-mortem database. The program identifies relationships among data entered on a reported missing person to speed identification of deceased and the reunification of separated families. Development of this software program is intended to include a highly secure, web-enabled program that automates Family Assistance case management, representing a significant advance that will benefit the nation as a whole in improved recovery operations in future large-scale disasters. The use of this software is intended to significantly enhance support to bereaved families while reducing the number of staff required to perform the work. Fourteen new servers were installed in three cabinets along with four uninterrupted power supplies to create a robust development and production environment for the new software application. This includes intrusion prevention system, web server, spatial data server, Internet Map Server, database and data warehouse servers. This program is currently in its testing phase.

The LFAC also established the www.familyassist.us website to provide the public with information on LFAC activities, a current list of the reported missing, and statistical data on the deceased. The statistical tables display victim information by race, age and parish done in charts for ease in visualizing the information.

In addition, the IT section used ArcGIS software to create a series of web-based maps of the entire region providing researchers and members of the public a visual representation of the geographical distribution of the missing, the found and the confirmed deceased by last known location as well as the

locations of recovered remains for the entire region. The IT section used critical historical data on the missing and deceased victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita collected by the LFAC to compile the various levels of data represented in the maps.

DMORT

The Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT) is a federal team under the organizational umbrella of the National Defense Medical Service (NDMS), which is part of FEMA. The members of DMORT represent a wide-range of specialties including forensic pathologists, forensic dentists, forensic anthropologists, radiology technicians, information technology professionals, medical records' specialists, medical-legal and law enforcement investigators, fingerprint specialists, funeral directors, database administrators, grief counselors and other mental health professionals, data entry specialists, photographers and evidence technicians. In addition to the identification of the deceased, obtaining ante-mortem information on the possible victims, and locating missing persons, DMORT was also involved with recovery of the storm victims. In addition to this, DMORT conducted cemetery operations, which included recovery, identification, casketing and return to local jurisdiction.

Victim Relief Ministries

Victim Relief Ministries, based in Dallas, TX mobilized and deployed disaster response teams prior to Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath of the storm, they provided Family Support operations at the LFAC. Founded in 1999, VRM mobilizes the faith community to partner with victim service organizations and law enforcement by reaching out to meet physical, emotional and spiritual needs of crime and disaster victims. It is not possible to underestimate the value of their service to the families of the hurricanes and to those whom they helped in the mission to reunite the families. Among their other long-term contributions has been the establishment of a Baton Rouge chapter of the Victim Relief Ministries, which will aid the people of Louisiana in future disasters and major crimes.

"We use the Good Samaritan parable as our model. On our first contact with a victim's family, we say to them, 'you're no longer alone.' That's when the tears come most often. They've felt so alone, hopeless."

Gene Grounds, Dallas, Victim Relief Ministries

The effort to reunite the hurricane families will continue

DHH and the LSP remain committed to the successful conclusion of the project begun in this unprecedented collaboration of many agencies that became known as the Louisiana Family Assistance Center. Necessary resources to continue the effort to identify the remains and to find the missing have been committed by the State of Louisiana.

However, with every solid lead exhausted to the identity of the remains or to locate the missing, and with the remaining reports of the missing maintaining a steady level for more than a month, the decision to draw down the massive effort of the LFAC was timely and appropriate.

As always throughout its operation, the needs of the families of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita remain the priority. The center was there for the dead, the missing and the living, who deserve to be reunited with their loved ones.

Service to the families will continue on the local level. LFAC has transitioned both its main efforts to local authorities: identification of the deceased and finding the missing. The transition has required flexibility and professionalism from all agencies involved.

The DNA identification efforts will continue on several levels. DHH and LSP will continue actively conducting the DNA analysis and kinship comparisons on the 23 remains that are still unidentified after going through the DMORT process. They also will continue to assist the Orleans Parish Coroner with the cases that came in after the DMORT morgue closed.

Responsibility for any new cases have shifted to local coroners' offices. If additional human remains are discovered, local coroners will be responsible for following their usual procedures for identification. The LSP Crime Lab is available for local coroners to use as a resource for DNA identification, and local coroners can collect bone samples from unidentified victims and send them to the State Police. As always, there is no charge to the families for processing DNA evidence to assist with identifications.

The 135 unresolved missing person case files have been transferred to local law enforcement agencies in the jurisdiction of each missing victim. New missing person reports will be taken by the appropriate law enforcement agency.

The remaining cases will be the most difficult to identify or resolve. For these cases, LFAC has combed through multiple databases, sent local and state level search teams to their last known addresses, conducted several searches through the State Police and have arranged for a cadaver dog search of their homes by the New Orleans Fire Department Search and Rescue division.

It is possible that some of the missing may never be found, but if leads do turn up, this process assures that they will be investigated.

Every family deserves to know what has happened to any loved one who remains missing or unidentified following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

"I couldn't picture putting myself in their (the families) shoes. My daughter died in a car wreck a year and a half ago. I know what happened to her and I got to say goodbye. But for these people, it's the not knowing, not having any idea what has happened to someone you love that is so painful."

Melissa Austin, Walker, La., LFAC Web Search

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MAJOR MILESTONES

August 29, 2005

Hurricane Katrina makes landfall on the Gulf Coast

September 7, 2005

Find Family National Call Center opens

Louis Cataldie, M.D., appointed State Medical Examiner

- 83 bodies recovered

October 8, 2005

FFNCC moves to Sherwood Forest Boulevard building

- Reported missing is 5,000



December 1, 2005

DMORT moves from St. Gabriel into Victim Identification Center in Carville

December 6, 2005

DNA team contracted by Louisiana State Police Crime Lab joins FFNCC

- More than 650 bodies identified

December 9, 2005

- Over 5,000 reported missing found alive; 4,300 still missing

January 1, 2006

- 908 bodies recovered
- 600 bodies released to next of kin (NOK)
- 142 bodies awaiting release to NOK
- 165 bodies unidentified

January 9, 2006

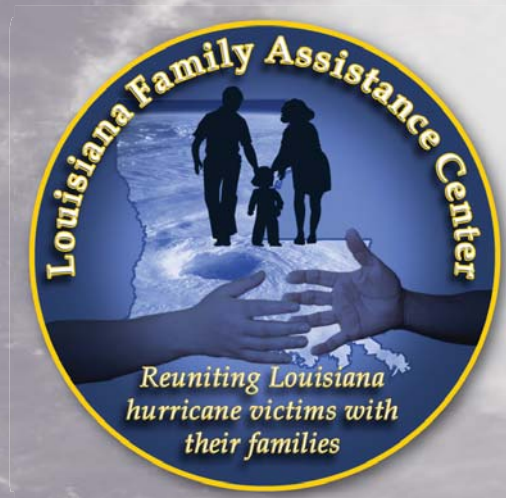
National Human Genome Research Institute genetics experts begin work with DNA team

- Over 7,000 reported missing found alive; over 3,600 still missing

February 15, 2006

FFNCC officially changes name to Louisiana Family Assistance Center (LFAC)

Analytic Services Inc. (ANSER) assumes LFAC operational management (federal contract managed by DHHS)



LFAC reported statistics:

- 12,875 reported missing
- 8,597 found alive
- 2,115 remain missing
- 912 bodies recovered
- 722 bodies released to NOK
- 96 bodies awaiting release to NOK
- 94 bodies unidentified

February 24, 2006

Victim Identification Center in Carville closes

DMORT completes the re-casketing of remains in cemeteries disturbed by storm surge

March 2, 2006

Victim Relief Ministries (VRM) opens victim assistance stations in Lower 9th Ward and Lakeview

March 3, 2006

DMORT demobilizes. Unidentified remains transferred to Orleans Parish Coroner

March 16, 2006

- < 1,500 remain missing
- 842 victims identified
- 68 unidentified remains

March 29, 2006

- Over 13,000 reported missing

April 4, 2006

- < 1,000 remain missing

April 5, 2006

- Largest number of missing found on one day (106)

April 12, 2006

- Survey of 1,522 displaced/damaged vaults, tombs completed (68 cemeteries)

April 28, 2006

- < 500 remain missing

May 1, 2006

VRM closes victim assistance station in Lakeview.

June 3, 2006

Operation Doorknockers: door-to-door search in New Orleans to contact individuals still on official missing list

June 4, 2006

Katrina Sunday: pastors throughout nation ask congregations to check missing list, help provide information on those still missing



June 27, 2006

LFAC reported statistics:

- 96.8% (881) of 910 victims identified
- 91.75% (835) released to NOK
- 46 bodies awaiting release to NOK
- 29 bodies unidentified

June 29, 2006

- < 150 remain missing

June 30, 2006

VRM closes victim assistance station in Lower 9th Ward



July 15, 2006

GIS maps of missing / deceased goes active on LFAC website

July 18, 2006

DNA operations transferred to local coroners

- Nearly 98% of victims (887 of 910) identified

August 1, 2006

New missing reports now referred to local law enforcement agencies

Unresolved missing reports transferred to local law enforcement

August 14, 2006

LFAC ceases formal operations

- 13,197 missing person reports were taken in by LFAC
- 10,746 found alive
- 820 confirmed as victims
- 1,496 referred to other jurisdictions or classified as non-storm related
- 135 unresolved cases are transferred to local law enforcement agencies



October 15, 2005

- More than 800 bodies recovered; nearly 150 identified

November 1, 2005

- Reported missing exceeds 10,000

