



**National  
Transportation  
Safety Board**

# **Transportation Accident Family Assistance: Current Status, Challenges, & Lessons Learned**

**The Honorable Jennifer Homendy  
Chair  
National Transportation Safety Board**

# Family Member and Survivor Engagement

- Established NTSB division and specialists dedicated to agency's family assistance program and operations
- Program prioritizes equitable care and treatment
- Proactive engagement with at least one family member for each vehicle occupant and ground casualty, regardless of injury severity
  - Inclusive family member definition
- Program serves all modes of transportation investigated by NTSB



# Effects of COVID Pandemic on Survivor and Family Engagement

- Leveraging multiple communication technologies
  - Increased engagement
  - Easier access to NTSB meetings and staff
  - Removes logistic/financial barriers associated with in-person meetings
  - Allows families to participate in a physical environment of their choosing
- Challenges
  - Impersonal – feeling disconnected
  - Difficult to assess emotions or reactions
  - Distractions
  - Meetings with in-person and remote attendees
- Risks
  - Degraded situational awareness
    - Limited awareness of participants with cameras off
    - Unregistered attendees
  - Privacy
    - Difficult to prevent recording

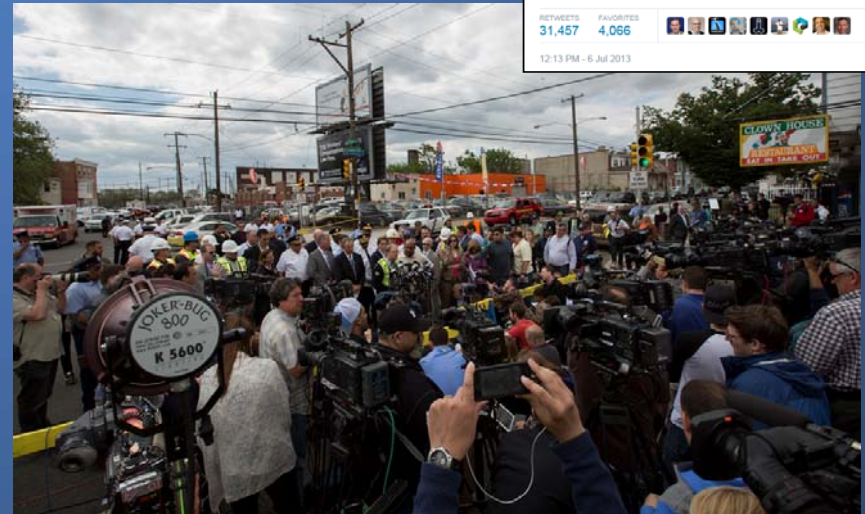


# Information Management

*“...the Board shall, to the maximum extent practicable, ensure that the families of passengers are briefed, prior to any public briefing, about the accident, its causes, and any other findings from the investigation.”*

49 USC § 1136

- Transparency fosters trust in the investigative process
- Challenges
  - 24-hour news cycle
  - Social media effect on notification of involvement through official sources
  - Timeliness and accuracy of information available via social media



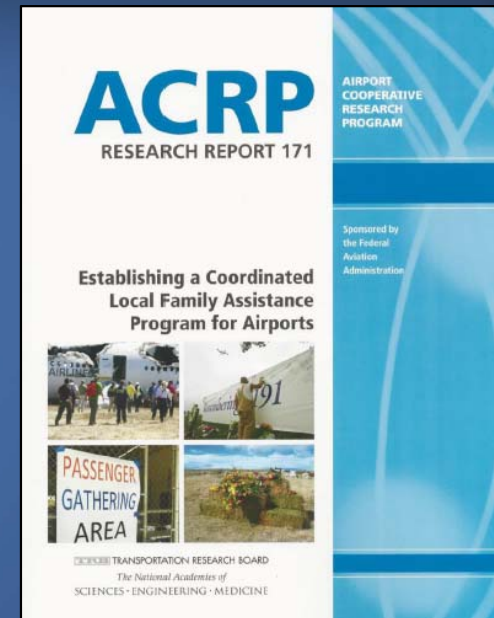
## Mass Fatality vs. Mass Casualty Family Assistance Operations

- Enhanced understanding of mass casualty response
- Shifting concept of operations from all-fatal to mass casualty incidents
- Traditional family assistance models established the Family Assistance Center as the focus of the operation
- Dispersion of survivors to hospitals poses a challenge for:
  - Reunification of survivors and family members
  - Equitable access to information and resources



# Air Carrier & Airport Programs

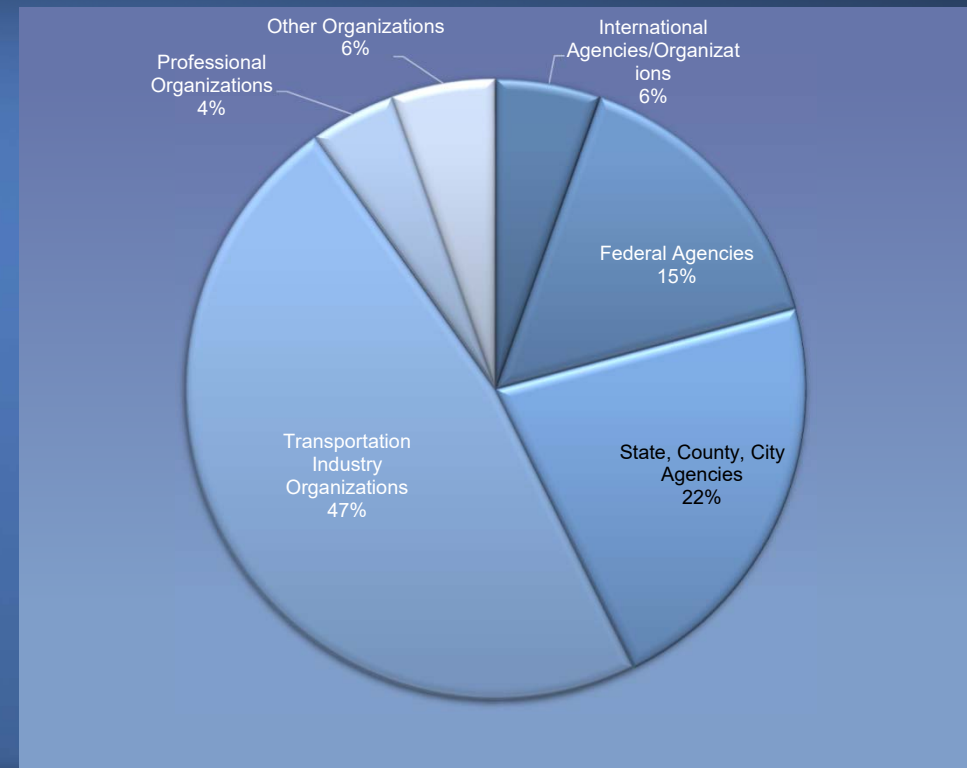
- Maturation of legacy domestic and foreign air carrier family assistance programs
- Increased turn-over in air carrier emergency management staff
  - Loss of historical knowledge
  - Lack of operational experience
- Airports have no legislated family assistance obligations
  - Many include family assistance in their emergency response plans
  - Established emergency response working groups
  - Operational guidance provided in ACRP Research Report 171



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# Developing & Maintaining Relationships

- Continual focus on connecting with the family assistance response community
- Identifying and nurturing critical partnerships with federal, state, local agencies, American Red Cross, and air carriers
- 2019 NTSB Engagement:
  - 71 outreach events with ~3,993 participants
  - Coordination with 347 family assistance response agencies/organizations
  - ~26 collaborations per week



# Effects of COVID Pandemic on Family Assistance Response Community Engagement

- Significant reduction in engagement during 2020
- Pivot to virtual platforms
- Resurgence of interest in 2021

CY	In-Person	Virtual
2019	64 (90%)	7 (10%)
2020	12* (29%)	30 (71%)
2021 (Jan-Sept)	13 (30%)	30 (70%)

\*All in-person events conducted January through March.





# Family Assistance: Lessons Learned

**Independent** and **transparent** safety investigation – safety not blame

**Well-designed family assistance plan** with a **single lead agency** that utilizes a **unified command concept of operations**

**Flexible and scalable** plans and operations

Family assistance **concepts of operation are broadly applicable** regardless of initiating event

**Organizational priority engrained in culture – a mindset**

*“We are humans before we are investigators.”*



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# Family Assistance: Lessons Learned

**Focus on fundamental concerns** of families within the boundaries of the investigative process and organization's mandate and capabilities

Establish and communicate **realistic expectations**

Build **rapport and credibility**

Engagement with **family members interested in safety advocacy initiative** - relationship does not terminate with the conclusion of the investigation

**Empathy** supported by knowledge

- Listen to the experiences of those impacted
- Learn from their experiences



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**Questions?**



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