



NTSB ACADEMY

Q & A – The Evolution and Future of Family Assistance

NTSB Office of Transportation Disaster Assistance

A conversation with Sharon Bryson, Erik Grosf and Paul Sledzik about the core values of Family Assistance, the effects of 9/11, and the challenges on the horizon.

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Left to right: **Erik Grosf**, Assistant to the Director - Operations; **Sharon Bryson**, Director; **Don Chupp**, Assistant to the Director for Family Support and Training; **Ken Suydam**, Coordinator, Emergency Response Operations; and **Paul Sledzik**, Manager, Victim Recovery and Identification

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the NTSB Office of Transportation Disaster Assistance (TDA). You have been with the office from the start. How has family assistance changed or evolved from the very first years to now?

BRYSON: In the last ten years there's been a greater understanding of what it takes to do an appropriate response to families. We know the basic formula for what it takes to do an investigation in a major accident. For a long time, however, the issues, needs and concerns of the families were overlooked and were certainly not part of the planning process. Fortunately, family assistance has become more prominent in the planning from a corporate standpoint as well as from other agencies in the government, and at the state level, and in the non-profit sector. It's clearly something that people have been paying more attention to over the last ten years.

In addition, working relationships between industry, government and non-profits have solidified in the last ten years. We all now know what to expect from one and other and have worked hard to make sure that the response goes well in the event of a major accident.

GROSOFF: I think the biggest change is that it's an open topic now. Family assistance was considered very touchy feely when I came to Board in 1997. Since then it's evolved into a much more professional understanding that it's about providing information, along with the protective elements to prevent what we call post-accident secondary assaults, and unwelcome intrusions by the media.

It's also giving family members a solid source of valid information, which I don't think they got prior to all these players coming together. And it's a cooperative effort, it's not just the NTSB. The airline industry today shares information among themselves through our "Chicago Meetings" where they talk very candidly about the challenges and successes that they faced in recent accidents. Everybody learns from these exchanges, which is a huge culture change from when Sharon and I started and things were more territorial.

SLEDZIK: What the passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act did was create a standard of care for families that never existed before. Other federal agencies and other industries have picked up on that and now try to provide that same level of care. And it is a challenge in some areas. We are frequently looked to as the best source of knowledge about particular topics in family assistance, and it's important for us to share this knowledge with others in the transportation community and the federal disaster response agencies.

What are the core values essential to providing effective family assistance?

BRYSON: Foremost is a commitment to doing what is right for the victims. It's keeping the focus not necessarily on what the rulebook says, but what is of value to that particular group of family members. Each accident is different. Each family group is different. So staying focused on the needs of that particular group is one of the things that are important.

The others core values are things like communication. Making sure that everyone is talking to one and other, both ahead of time from a preparedness standpoint, in the pre-launch process, on-scene, and in the follow-up phase of what we are doing so that things don't fall through the cracks and people don't get misinterpreted.

And then there is the issue of flexibility. It's important that people be willing to do whatever is needed even if it's not something that was expected or anticipated.

GROSOF: And then there is the advantage of experience. By having professionals that do this all the time you get consistency and an enormous amount of institutional knowledge. There are nuances in an accident response that many people would just miss because they don't do it all the time, but attending to these can be very important.

I think that we have the concept of being the lighthouse in the storm. Whatever has to be done will be done, but we'll do it not only with a lot of common sense and sensitivity, but also an appreciation for what people are going through.

SLEDZIK: The focus and tools that first responders and emergency managers bring to disaster response are very different from the types of things that we do here in this office. There's an under-appreciation in that community for those values and methods that we use. The way that we do our work is very different from that of emergency managers and first responders, but those are the groups that are driving a lot of the response mechanisms out there.

Can you say a little bit more about the differences?

SLEDZIK: First responders are dealing with the initial response, and we are not a first response group. We provide a longer-term support that many in the emergency response realm are just not aware of. They are worried about things like handling the injured, evacuating people out to safe areas, and such, and we are dealing with the complex needs of family members of those killed in accidents. It is a very different approach.

GROSOF: And that's why we have done so much outreach with public safety. A lot of the things that they do in those initial hours of the event as first responders not only effect the investigation, but also what's going to happen to personal effects, human remains, and other operation things that will be required.

While every accident is unique, are there any challenges that are present during almost every accident response?

BRYSON: The one thing that's constant is the chaos that you see, especially in the very beginning hours, and sometimes even days. These events, for good reason, tend to get people moving in a very energized way. Our task it to make sure that we overlay that fairly quickly with some organization so that families who have had their entire worlds turned upside down and feel as though they have control over very little or nothing can at least be put into a system, a helping structure, that provides them with some sense that things are orderly.

Another constant, and I'm always struck by this, is how people really step up to the plate. In just about every sense I can think of, those from police departments, hospitals, emergency responders, fire fighters, and local communities have done some pretty remarkable things when these large events take place. Somehow, through all of the chaos, people find a way to do the right thing. It's not a challenge as much as it is a level of comfort that when we are really tested people will do what the right thing is at that particular point in time.

The events of 9/11 changed many things in American life. Though the plane crashes were criminal events investigated by the FBI, never in recent times have there been so many fatalities on a single day in the United States. Did the massive response by numerous organizations to aid the thousands of victims' families yield any new lessons learned? In short, will the 9/11 responses have an effect on how the NTSB will respond to future mass fatality transportation accidents?

BRYSON: One of the things that it did was bring home to other organizations, like the FBI, Department of Defense and other agencies, the need to have a plan to do large-scale victim assistance. The FBI has completely revamped their program. It wasn't where it is today prior to 9/11. The DoD has done some very similar kinds of things internally in terms of programs, training and structure to be able to effectively manage a response to a large-scale event like 9/11. Most of them had victim assistance programs in place at that time but none of them planned on doing a family assistance center here in the United States.

DoD thinks in terms of things happening to their soldiers overseas and bringing them back to a reception center at Dover (Delaware). The FBI thinks more in terms of regional jurisdictional types of situations as opposed to large-scale events like we saw here in D.C., New York and Pennsylvania. So there were a lot of lessons learned in that regard. And our relationship with both of those organizations is stronger because of it. We've trained together since then. We've taught them and they have taught us. It's clearly given some strength to the movement of family assistance.

GROSOFF: There was nothing in the books to have four jets crash simultaneously, regardless of whether it was criminal. Nonetheless, the carriers used the Federal Plan as a guide to the response. We modified that a bit by setting up a joint operations group with both affected airlines, American and United, in the same room. We will now use that model, and the carriers have agreed to this, in the event of a major runway incursion involving two airlines.

TDA has a close relationship with the FBI Office of Victim Assistance (OVA), which assists victims of criminal events such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The NTSB is the lead agency in an aircraft accident unless a determination is made that the crash was caused by a criminal event. What happens if days after a plane crashes it is determined that it was a criminal event and not an accident? How would the NTSB and FBI manage such a situation?

BRYSON: The FBI Victim Assistance Program is built on the same premise as the NTSB plan. Their published response plan looks very similar to the NTSB's response plan, which employs the same basic philosophy and approaches. Post 9/11, the plan is that if we have a situation that could become criminal, the FBI Victim Assistance people will join us in the family assistance center so that the family members can begin to become familiar with them. Once it's determined by the NTSB Chairman and the Attorney General that the FBI is going to take over, we'll make that announcement to families and the FBI victim specialists will take the lead in the family center and the TDA team will be there to support them.

From a family member standpoint, the transition should be rather gentle and relatively seamless. Obviously the information flow will change and different things will be done to support family members in a criminal event, but the comfort level should be there in terms of the transition from the NTSB to the FBI. I would see us pretty much standing side-by-side for several days while that change is being made so that families don't have a feeling that they are just being tossed from one agency to another.

According to the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 that established TDA as an office within the NTSB, each airline must formulate a plan to effectively manage its family assistance efforts after an accident. In the past several years enrollment in the family assistance course from others in the transportation industry – cruise lines, railroads, bus companies and others who have no legislated requirement to provide family assistance after an accident – have steadily increased. What's going on here?

BRYSON: The cruise lines, rail, and to some degree, highway, have seen the effectiveness of the plan, which requires communities, industry, non-profits, state and local governments, to come together to provide assistance to victims' families. And many of them have recognized that assisting people in the aftermath of the disaster is not just the right thing to do, but it makes good business sense as well.

They have found this to be the only source for that kind of training, that kind of comprehensive look at not just the emergency response section of what they do but assistance to the victims and survivors in an environment that is really comprehensive and thorough and experienced.

Looking at the next 10 years, what are some of the biggest challenges people involved in family assistance are likely to face?

BRYSON: The recent events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, where there were significant numbers of people impacted by a mass disaster, clearly demonstrates the need for everyone to take a look at their plans and to train and reach agreements among organizations so that an appropriate response can be put together in the aftermath of events like those.

And in the aviation world, the introduction of the large aircraft that carry in excess of 500 passengers is clearly a challenge. We're going to be seeing more people flying charter aircraft and involved in fractional ownership kinds of arrangements where there may not be a family assistance plan in place. These types of situations will present some challenges and difficulties.

The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act clearly raised the bar on family assistance and for the first time documented what the core requirements were to be able to provide that sort of service. So maintaining that level of response and instituting that, both in natural disasters as well as criminal events and transportation disasters, is one of our challenges as we move forward.

The NTSB Office of Transportation Disaster Assistance will be holding a family assistance symposium in October 2006. What is the primary purpose of the symposium?

BRYSON: The symposium will present the opportunity to look at the grass roots efforts that put the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act in place and to clearly understand how that happened and what the interests were that drove that. And also to look at where we are today, ten years later. And lastly, to have a discussion about where the next ten years will take us.