A Commitment to Families

Thirty Years of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act — What Families Changed, What We Learned, and What Comes Next

> *The legislation created the structure. Families created the imperative.*
> — ADFAA survey analysis (2026)



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Cover photo: Official White House photograph, 1996. Collection of Jennifer Stansberry Miller.

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- **Tony Zanger,** Family Member, Northwest Flight 255

We also thank the families and survivors of every aviation disaster whose letters, testimony, and advocacy built the Act. They created the imperative, and this paper honors that dedication. A special acknowledgment to the families of USAir Flight 427 who initiated the movement.

- **Korean Air Lines (KAL) Flight 007:** Near Moneron Island, Soviet Union, September 1, 1983
- **Northwest Airlines Flight 255:** Romulus, Michigan, August 16, 1987
- **Pan Am Flight 103:** Lockerbie, Scotland, December 21, 1988
- **United Airlines Flight 232:** Sioux City, Iowa, July 19, 1989
- **USAir Flight 5050:** LaGuardia Airport, New York, September 20, 1989
- **USAir Flight 1493:** Los Angeles International Airport, California, February 1, 1991
- **USAir Flight 405:** LaGuardia Airport, New York, March 22, 1992
- **USAir Flight 427:** Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 8, 1994
- **American Eagle Flight 4184:** Roselawn, Indiana, October 31, 1994
- **U.S. Air Force CT-43A:** Near Dubrovnik, Croatia, April 3, 1996
- **ValuJet Flight 592:** Florida Everglades, May 11, 1996
- **TWA Flight 800:** Atlantic Ocean, near East Moriches, New York, July 17, 1996

1. Marking 30 years

Thirty years ago, families of those killed in aviation disasters and those who survived them were not only grieving profound losses and recovering from injuries. They also faced failures that compounded their trauma: uncertainty about whether loved ones had been aboard, delayed or inadequate notifications, unreliable information, questions about the recovery and identification of remains, mishandled personal belongings, and consequential decisions made without adequate information or support.

Across multiple disasters, families and survivors recognized that these failures were not isolated. They came together, shared their experiences, identified recurring problems, and demanded change. Their advocacy transformed personal tragedy into lasting reform.

On October 9, 1996, Congress signed the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act into law, establishing a new expectation for how people should be treated after an aviation disaster—one grounded in timely information, coordinated assistance, dignity, and compassion.

This paper is intended for professionals who plan for, lead, and deliver family assistance. Drawing on more than 30 years of historical records and the perspectives of families, survivors, and experienced professionals, it examines what led to the Act, what changed because of it, and its influence within aviation and beyond. It also considers what three decades of experience have taught us and the challenges that will shape the next generation of family assistance.

2. What Happened: The “Second Disaster”

Before 1996, no formal, coordinated system existed to meet the needs of families and survivors after an aviation disaster. Although air carriers, local authorities, and federal agencies acted within their own responsibilities, families and survivors generally had no clear source of reliable information, no single agency coordinating assistance, and no access to immediate psychosocial support. Airline communications often left families without the answers they needed, while insensitive handling of human remains and personal effects compounded their distress.

These systemic gaps became evident across multiple aviation disasters. After USAir Flight 427 crashed near Pittsburgh on September 8, 1994, families searching for their loved ones’ belongings six months later found them discarded in a trash bin outside the hangar where the wreckage was stored—rings, watches, jewelry, personal planners, address books, and wallets left sitting in the mud for half a year.

Less than two months later, American Eagle Flight 4184 crashed in Roselawn, Indiana, killing 64 passengers and four crew members. Seventeen caskets of “unidentified remains” were buried at night by the coroner without the families being informed. The Stansberry family was given remains that later proved not to be those of their son and brother, Brad. After discovering the mishandling, the family asked that the unidentified remains be removed; the casket was disinterred, the remains removed,

and they were placed in the common grave. Brad's remains were never identified. The same failures surfaced across disaster after disaster, demonstrating the need for a fundamentally different approach to supporting victims and their families.

Families came to call what followed the crash **"the second disaster."**

> *Imagine a traffic accident in which a dump truck collides with a van and kills several people… Now imagine that the construction company owning the truck notified the next of kin, decided what happened to the victims' personal effects, and chose when and where unidentified remains would be buried. Well, that's what happens with the airlines' role in airplane crashes.*
>
> — Doug Smith, father of Alison Field, American Eagle Flight 4184, Roselawn, Indiana

3. What Families Demanded

In late 1994, families of those killed in the crashes of USAir Flight 427 and American Eagle Flight 4184 began connecting with families and survivors of earlier aviation disasters who had faced many of the same problems. On June 20, 1995, they joined survivors of USAir Flight 405 and USAir Flight 5050 in a meeting with NTSB Chairman Jim Hall and Transportation Secretary Federico Peña. During the meeting, families and survivors outlined their shared experiences, identifying recurring concerns in how they had been treated and supported. The concerns documented at that meeting became a cornerstone of what would ultimately become the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act.

Their recommendations to Hall and Peña were specific and practical:

- A dedicated toll-free line for accident calls, with enough capacity to manage a large number of incoming calls, and the ability to return unanswered calls.
- Immediate access to the passenger manifest to confirm a passenger's name, with knowledge that the list might be inaccurate.
- A designated third party, not the airline, responsible for post-trauma communication, personal effects management, the handling of remains, and coordinating family consent for every burial decision.
- Regular family meetings, printed explanations detailing the responsibilities of every organization, and controls on media and legal access to families.
- Consistent, well-trained disaster plans across airlines, and, in the meeting summary's words, "Airports, airlines, and the local community should work together."

Marita Brunner, who lost her brother-in-law on USAir 427 and co-founded the Flight 427 Air Disaster Support League, told the press in 1995:

> *We believe the system for notifying, communicating to, and servicing the families of passengers is deeply flawed. Based on what we have been through, we are demanding that control over this vital communications process be taken away from the airline involved and put into the hands of a single, respected entity or group that can fairly represent the interests of those who have suffered so great a loss.*
>
> — Marita Brunner, USAir 427 family member

The recommendations were practical responses to problems families and survivors had repeatedly experienced. Reflecting on their calls for reform, NTSB Chairman Jim Hall observed:

> *Family members are demanding more accountability and more services in the aftermath of an accident. I believe that most of these demands are just common sense.*
>
> — James E. Hall, Chairman, National Transportation Safety Board, quoted in The New York Times, 1995

That common sense came at a cost:

> *Families gave tremendously to this legislation and framework following an unthinkable loss for the purpose of keeping others from the re-traumatization that occurred.*
>
> — Sharon Bryson

By 1996, the families' efforts had moved from identifying the problems to pressing for legislative change. Families and survivors launched a focused letter-writing and outreach campaign to members of Congress and traveled to Capitol Hill to advocate for reform. Two additional crashes that year—ValuJet Flight 592 and TWA Flight 800—added urgency to the effort. Families from both accidents called on the NTSB to coordinate the humanitarian response, while proposed legislation incorporating many of their concerns was already taking shape in Congress.

Eight days after the crash of TWA Flight 800, President Clinton traveled to New York and met with hundreds of family members gathered near JFK Airport. Their frustrations with communication, access to information, and the response to families brought many of the same concerns raised by families of earlier disasters directly to the White House. Less than three months later, on October 9, 1996, President Clinton signed the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act into law.

At the signing, President Clinton turned to the families in the room:

> *I would like to thank all the family members who are here for the effort they have made in going beyond their own personal suffering in order to achieve some positive results for our country in the future.*
>
> — President Bill Clinton

Passage of the Act was not the end of the reform effort. The Act also called for a federal task force to examine additional issues affecting families after aviation disasters and recommend further improvements. The Task Force on Assistance to Families of Aviation Disasters brought together representatives of families, federal agencies, the aviation industry, and organizations involved in disaster response, extending the work beyond the Act's initial requirements.

In October 1997, the Task Force issued its report to the Vice President and Congress. Its 61 recommendations built upon many of the concerns families and survivors had raised and identified additional changes for government and industry, including:

- Define "family" broadly, improve passenger notification, provide timely updates, protect privacy, and coordinate with the Red Cross.
- Support families with travel, lodging, trained Customer Assistance Relief Efforts (CARE)/Special Assistance Team (SAT) members, appropriate early financial assistance, and prompt handling of personal effects.
- Extend the attorney solicitation ban from 30 to 45 days, include agents or "runners," and allow families to rescind hastily signed agreements.
- Improving communication with families, including efforts to provide families with important information before its public release.

What began with families and survivors comparing their experiences and identifying recurring failures had become federal law and a framework for continued reform. Their advocacy fundamentally changed families' role in the aftermath of an aviation disaster and set expectations for greater coordination, timely information, privacy, dignity, and support.

The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act did not resolve every challenge, nor did the evolution of family assistance end with its passage. It did, however, establish the foundation for a new approach—one that would reshape how government, air carriers, airports, and response organizations support families and survivors after an aviation disaster.

4. What the Act Established

The Act at a glance (Pub. L. 104-264, Title VII; 49 U.S.C. §§ 1136, 41113)

- **Federal coordination.** The NTSB coordinates federal, state, local, and carrier support to families, through what became its Office of Transportation Disaster Assistance (TDA).
- **Non-governmental care.** The American Red Cross coordinates crisis counseling, mental health, and grief support.
- **Carrier family assistance plans.** Air carriers must maintain and train on plans covering prompt passenger manifest handling, consultation on remains and personal effects, and family involvement in memorials. The Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act of 1997 extended this to foreign carriers serving the U.S.
- **Solicitation ban.** Attorneys may not solicit victims' families for 45 days (originally 30, extended in 2000).
- **Task force.** The Act created a task force of agencies, carriers, and families.

For families who had experienced the system before the Act, these changes represented a fundamental shift.

> *Prior to the passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996, air disaster response was a chaotic nightmare. Since its passage, it has transformed tragedy into a commitment to ensure that families receive compassion, dignity, timely information, support and care when they need it most.*
>
> — Tony Zanger

That shift was also evident inside the NTSB. Peter Goelz, managing director of the Board when the Act was passed and instrumental in aligning its work with the new requirements, recalls:

> *The act was a watershed event in the ways family members of victims and the victims themselves were treated worldwide. No longer could air carriers dictate the levels of care and responsiveness following a disaster. There were suddenly standards that were to be met and there was oversight from a respected public agency.*
>
> — Peter Goelz

Joan Pontante, another Northwest 255 family member who traveled to Washington to help advocate for the Act, points to the value of one provision in particular:

> *What was so horrible for my family were the amount of lawyers that were calling continuously after they were killed on Northwest 255. Three weeks after the crash, we went to Mesa, Arizona to close up their home, and on my brother's phone were lawyers leaving messages. Thank God the Act passed — lawyers can't call families for 45 days. It was worth going to DC to help pass this.*
>
> — Joan Pontante

Beyond its individual provisions, those involved in family assistance describe a broader change in the posture of disaster response.

> *The impact of the Act's requirements speaks to a shift in disaster response from a "closed" process where family members could not get information and coordinated support to one focused on family member needs.*
>
> — Paul Sledzik

> *While you cannot legislate decency, it was essentially the golden rule for how companies, government agencies and those with power treat individuals during their most vulnerable moments.*
>
> — Debbie Hersman

That change was not only philosophical. The Act also gave responders and organizations a clearer framework for action. Ken Jenkins, who managed American Airlines' emergency response and CARE program, says the Act reduced his anxiety by providing a clear path for response and a baseline for what organizations were expected to do. He encouraged his team to meet or exceed those

requirements—a floor, not a ceiling. Compassion is easier to deliver when everyone knows their role. The Act brought similar clarity to the federal response. Elias Kontanis, the NTSB's current chief of the Division of Transportation Disaster Assistance, "is the foundation upon which the NTSB's family assistance program was built," establishing the Board's duty to facilitate victim recovery and identification, designate an organization for emotional and psychological care, and keep survivors and families informed of the investigation.

What began as a framework for aviation disaster response would not remain confined to aviation. Its principles—and the family assistance model that developed around them—would influence how other sectors and communities support people affected by mass-casualty events.

5. The Ripple Effect: Beyond Aviation

Putting the Act into practice required building that framework it envisioned. In the fall of 1996, the NTSB began building the TDA program and developing a model response framework. The effort was remarkable and unprecedented: a small investigative agency, supported by a newly hired team of family assistance specialists, had to design and implement a plan required by federal law. That plan coordinated federal agencies, the commercial airline industry, nonprofit organizations, and state and local governments in responding to a major aviation disaster, with humanitarian support as its central focus.

How the framework became a model beyond aviation

The framework translated the Act's requirements and the Task Force's recommendations into operational procedures. Its value became clear in responses to accidents in the late 1990s and early 2000s, where communities and organizations saw the model work in practice. Over time, the Act and the NTSB framework became a proven approach for meeting the needs of family members beyond aviation.

One reason the model translated beyond aviation is that the fundamental needs of people affected by disaster are often the same, regardless of the event type. Whether the event is an aviation accident, an act of terrorism, a natural disaster, or an incident of mass violence, those affected often have the same urgent questions: *Is my loved one involved? Where are they? Who can provide accurate information? What happens next?*

Today, the principles reflected in the model appear in transportation, federal victim services, healthcare, emergency management, higher education, public health, and responses to mass-casualty and mass-fatality incidents.

Core principles of the response

Although specific arrangements and responsible agencies may vary, the principles guiding the response remain consistent: establish a safe facility where families can gather, provide trained staff to

assist them, share timely and accurate information before it is released to the media, coordinate the accounting for and identification of victims, handle personal belongings with care, and ensure that people continue to have access to information and resources during and after the response.

Paul Sledzik has noted these practices in local and state government emergency plans and in several countries. Kassandra Joumpi highlights their use in healthcare, public health, and emergency management. Gregory Crick points out that the cruise industry, though not subject to the Act, "has drawn inspiration from it to create its own Family Assistance and Care Teams program." Moreover, Elias Kontanis observes that no single organization can meet all these requirements alone and cites collaboration between carriers, agencies, non-profit organizations, and investigators as a model now used beyond the aviation sector.

The ripple effect is unmistakable: practices shaped by aviation families' experiences helped establish a broader expectation for how people should be cared for after a disaster.

Domain	Law/Policy, or Planning Framework	Family Assistance Elements
Rail	Rail Passenger Disaster Family Assistance Act of 2008 (49 U.S.C. § 1139)	NTSB and carrier coordination, Red Cross support, personal effects return. Scope excludes light rail, subways, commuter rail, and tourist railroads.
Multiple transportation modes	49 U.S.C. § 1140 (2018)	For accidents not covered under the aviation and rail legislation, requires NTSB to keep family members and survivors informed of investigative work (prior to media release) and to provide notice of any Board hearings and meeting related to such accidents.
Mining	MINER Act of 2006; Mine Safety Health Administration (MSHA) family liaison expansion	Requires a designated federal official tasked with managing communications and support during severe mining accidents.
Terrorism & mass violence	Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) amendments (2000); FBI Victim Services Division; Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP) and International Terrorism Victim Expense Reimbursement Program (ITVERP)	Family liaison and assistance generalized to terrorism victims, with crisis response, compensation coordination, and expense reimbursement.
Emergency management (state & county)	MA Survivor and Family Assistance Plan; NY Fatality Management Annex (2025); King County, Maricopa County, and WA Puget Sound plans	"Family Assistance Center" as a key concept in planning documents, need for briefings on victim recovery and identification. New York writes the NTSB into its plan as a partner for non-transportation events.
Hospitals & healthcare	CMS Emergency Preparedness Rule (2016; revised 2019), covering 18 provider types; ASPR TRACIE guidance	Hospital Family Support Center concept adopted: patient-family intake, updates to families first, a private notification room. CMS requires disaster planning coordinated with local systems but does not name family support.

That influence now appears across legislation, federal programs, and emergency planning well beyond commercial aviation. The examples below illustrate how elements of the family assistance model have been incorporated or reflected in other sectors, even when those sectors are not governed by the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act.

An International Framework

The family assistance model's influence was not limited to the United States. The principles families and survivors had fought to establish increasingly became part of the international conversation about how victims and families should be supported following an aviation disaster.

Over the last 15 years, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a United Nations body, has made family assistance a core part of aviation accident preparedness. The initiative grew from family advocacy rooted in the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act. At ICAO's 32nd Assembly in 1998, Spain and Jim Hall, then Chairman of the NTSB, proposed applying the Act's principles across ICAO's then-191 Member States. Beginning in 2011, Debbie Hersman, Paul Sledzik, and Elias Kontanis helped advance ICAO's family assistance work. ICAO issued policy guidance and practical planning documents in 2013, and in 2022, Annex 9 Amendment 29 introduced binding Standards and Recommended Practices for States and recommended emergency planning by operators. Member States are now expected to establish legislation, regulations, and coordinated plans for victims and families, while airports and air operators are expected to align their emergency response plans.

As this international framework developed, countries and regions established or strengthened their own laws, regulations, policies, and plans for aviation disaster family assistance. While the specific requirements vary, many reflect principles familiar from the U.S. experience: timely passenger information, family notification, coordinated assistance, psychological support, travel and lodging assistance, family liaison, and continuing communication.

Country/Region	Key Takeaway
European Union	Requires national emergency plans, rapid passenger lists so authorities can quickly verify who was on board, support family notification, reduce uncertainty, and coordinate information-sharing; also requires advance payments and organized support for urgent family needs after an accident.
Australia	Requires a Family Support Centre, assigned family liaisons, travel and accommodation support, and advance assistance to help families reach the accident location and receive updates.
South Korea	Uses a government-led framework that can provide emergency funds, medical and psychological assistance, legal aid, claims support, and ongoing communication about the response and investigation.
Brazil	Requires rapid passenger and crew manifests for verification, family reception and notification, travel and lodging assistance, repatriation support, and monitoring of the carrier's family-assistance response.
China	Requires a coordinated state-airline response that may include psychological support, family housing, local assistance arrangements, and periodic updates on search, recovery, and investigation activity.
Japan	Emphasizes liaison support, timely communication, responses to family inquiries, access to relevant information, and progress updates from investigators and responsible authorities.

Before his death in 2013, Hans Ephraimson-Abt, a KAL 007 family member and chair of the Air Crash Victims Families Group, described what the extension meant to the families who pushed for it:

> *Since the initiative to extend the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act to all 191 ICAO Member States, we have been privileged to make considerable progress to keep post-crash crisis management up to date — learning from the aftermath and the resolution of sad subsequent incidents, accidents, tragedies and apocalyptic occurrences.*
>
> — Hans Ephraimson-Abt

6. What Leaders Need to Know

The experiences of families and survivors have prompted meaningful improvements across industries, governments, and countries. These examples underscore a central responsibility for industry leaders: to care for and support the people most affected by accidents and major events. This responsibility should shape both organizational decision-making and the way families and survivors are treated. While the principle is straightforward, putting it into practice can feel overwhelming, especially amid the intense emotions that often follow a serious incident. However, evidence from the past 30 years shows that prioritizing the needs of families and survivors strengthens the overall effectiveness of an organization's response.

Over the past three decades, family assistance programs have generated a substantial body of plans, procedures, and practical lessons. Contributors to this paper identified several priorities for leaders responsible for these initiatives:

- Put individuals and their needs at the center of the response.
- Prepare in advance so teams can act with clarity and confidence.
- Invest in the people who will respond, ensuring they have the training, support, and resources they need.
- Stay focused on the framework's original purpose: supporting families and survivors with care, dignity, and consistency.

1. ***Family assistance is the primary focus of the response.***
   The Act helped redefine what a successful disaster response looks like. Managing the incident is only part of the responsibility; how people are cared for during and after it matters to an even greater extent.

   > *The Act helped demonstrate that a successful response is not measured solely by how quickly an incident is managed, but also by how well organizations support people through some of the most difficult moments of their lives.*
   >
   > — Kassandra Joumpi

Such an approach requires coordination across providing information, victim identification, personal effects management, access to resources, and emotional support. It also requires something harder to capture in a plan: compassion.

> *In those moments, people don't necessarily remember every step of the process or procedure. They remember how they were treated.*
>
> — Gregory Crick

> *The public, oversight agencies, your customers, and your employees watch carefully when a disaster occurs to see how the company responds. If it is poor, the repercussions are widespread and lasting. It is worth the time of any CEO to truly understand the dynamics of a critical incident and know that the humane handling of such an event makes all the difference.*
>
> — Peter Goelz

Elias Kontanis, whose TDA team works with families every day, makes the same point: plans and procedures matter, he says, but family assistance is "ultimately about people". The most effective responses come from listening to survivors and family members and treating them with dignity, respect, and compassion.

2. ***The plan is only as good as the people prepared to carry it out.***
Effective family assistance requires more than assigning names to an organizational chart. People in these roles need the correct temperament, judgment, and support to interact effectively with those experiencing considerable uncertainty and loss. When appointing leaders, candidates who authentically display compassion should be selected to be the voice of the organization.

> *Find those that care about people and can express it.*
>
> — Richard B. Marx

Preparation also means recognizing when you need specialized expertise. As Bob VandePol cautions, "You don't know what you don't know. Bring in experts who specialize in this initiative."

Organizations must prepare these key people before the crisis occurs. Training, exercises, clearly defined roles, established partnerships, and quick access to resources allow responders to focus on families. Experience has shown that organizations that attempt to build a response while simultaneously delivering it consistently fail.

Elias Kontanis adds a caution often overlooked: family assistance work is demanding and emotionally taxing, so organizations must care for the people doing it. Responders need support to represent their organization effectively during the family assistance process.

3. ***Leadership determines whether preparedness becomes practice.***
Family assistance requires an investment well before it is needed. Maintaining readiness is difficult since emergency and crisis response functions do not produce income and may remain inactive for years.

> *ER/crisis response is not a profit department. However, executives need to know how much they can lose if the organization does not respond appropriately to a disaster.*
>
> — Ken Jenkins

> *Investing in the care of survivors, families, employees, and communities affected by a critical incident is both a moral responsibility and a strategic imperative.*
>
> — Kassandra Joumpi

Leadership establishes the organizational culture that guides the response. Families and survivors need realistic expectations and organizations that follow through on what they promise. The opportunity to establish trust may be brief, while rebuilding it once lost can be far more difficult.

> *An organization can do everything right but will be judged as a failure if they do not properly assist those impacted.*
>
> — Sharon Bryson

Elias Kontanis frames the stakes in organizational terms:

> *While there is a clear humanitarian drive to care for people in times of crisis, investing in family assistance also protects two of an organization's most valuable assets: its human capital and its brand capital, and instills a culture of caring in the fabric of an organization.*
>
> — Elias Kontanis

A written plan alone does not ensure an effective response. Organizations also need committed leadership, trained personnel, exercised partnerships, adequate resources, support for employees and responders, and a clear understanding that supporting families must remain the response's central priority.

4. ***Remember why the Act was created.***
The most important lesson for leaders is also the one most easily forgotten over time: family assistance was not created as an administrative function, but as a response to the preventable harm people repeatedly experienced after catastrophic loss.

> *Understand why the Act exists. The history of how we, as a nation, came to the Act will help ensure mistakes made in the past are not made again in the future.*
>
> — Ken Jenkins

> *Families gave tremendously after unimaginable losses so that those who came after them would not experience the same re-traumatization.*
>
> — Sharon Bryson

History is not merely background; it provides a basis for preparation and investment, and it serves to remind executives and their organizations that they must not become complacent.

7. The Next Evolution of Family Assistance

Family assistance has never been static. The NTSB's Federal Family Assistance Framework has evolved through lessons from actual responses and now focuses on four fundamental concerns for those affected: notification of involvement, victim accounting, information and resources, and personal effects. These needs remain at the center of family assistance, even as the environment in which they must be addressed continues to change.

The Act became law in an era before the internet, smartphones, social media, and artificial intelligence were regular features of everyday life — when information moved slowly and organizations largely controlled when and how they released it. Thirty years on, that world is gone. Families and survivors can see footage of the incident before official notification procedures even begin. A name or image can spread globally within minutes, unauthorized fundraising campaigns can appear almost as fast, and misinformation can outrun the response team trying to correct it.

Priorities for the Next Generation

Thirty years after the Act, family assistance must evolve with changes in technology, communication, disaster response, and the ways families and survivors experience tragedy. The next generation of planning should consider these seven priorities:

1. **Integrate airports and response partners.** Airports, air carriers, government agencies, and community partners must plan, train, exercise, and communicate as one coordinated family assistance system.
2. **Modernize communication and digital protection.** Families and survivors need timely access to trained people through telephone, text, secure websites, virtual briefings, multilingual services, and other accessible channels. Plans must also address misinformation, impersonation, harassment, privacy breaches, and unauthorized use of names, images, and personal information.
3. **Address immediate financial needs and exploitation.** Organizations should be prepared to provide timely, good-faith assistance for urgent expenses while helping families and survivors identify and respond to fraudulent or unauthorized fundraising.
4. **Strengthen victim accounting, recovery, and identification.** Medicolegal systems should develop and maintain the capacity to effectively manage a mass fatality response, particularly because the field has modernized in the past two decades. These proven procedures should become part of a mass fatality plan. Just as importantly, medical examiner and coroner offices should also ensure they coordinate with family assistance operations, particularly in providing information on the search, recovery and identification processes.
5. **Invest in the people who care for those affected.** Effective response requires personnel with the right temperament, training, experience, and clearly defined authority to support families and survivors. Plans should also address responder stress, well-being, and recovery.

6. **Preserve and apply lessons learned.** Lessons from past responses should inform planning, exercises, policy development, after-action reviews, and long-term improvements. Organizations should protect records of lasting historical and operational value and ensure that knowledge is transferred to future leaders and responders. Preserving this institutional memory also allows the lessons of aviation disaster family assistance to strengthen responses to other mass-casualty and mass-fatality incidents.
7. **Extend support beyond the immediate response.** Family assistance should not end when a center closes or people return home. Plans should address continuing communication, unresolved practical concerns, anniversaries, legal milestones, and connections to long-term resources.

Thirty years ago, families asked for changes that went beyond procedures. They asked for a response system that recognized a simple truth: what happens after an accident matters. That responsibility does not end when the Family Assistance Center closes or the formal response concludes. The next generation of family assistance must anticipate how the disaster experience is changing while ensuring that compassion, dignity, accurate information, and meaningful support continue for as long as they are needed.

8. Closing

Perhaps the Act's greatest legacy is not its legislation but the expectation those affected receive a coordinated, honest, and compassionate response. This expectation exists because bereaved families and survivors have turned their sorrow into public service by highlighting shortcomings and helping protect those who come after. Families who campaigned for changes to prevent future injuries and deaths were, as former NTSB Chair Debbie Hersman noted, "...often the most effective advocates in changing the existing situation." As a result, policy has changed, safety has improved, and the way organizations handle people affected by disasters has been transformed.

To honor that legacy, we must not only recall how the Act came about but also acknowledge the long-term human effects of each decision after a disaster. Decisions made under pressure—often within minutes—can impact individuals and families for generations. Poorly designed procedures, unprepared personnel, delayed information, or lack of compassion can worsen trauma and shape how the disaster is remembered. Although a well-prepared and humane response cannot reverse what happened, it can prevent further harm, maintain dignity, build trust, and provide a foundation for families and survivors to rebuild their lives.

This is the enduring responsibility of family assistance: to realize each decision carries the weight of someone else's life and may affect that life and future generations forever.

> *There is no greater honor and no greater responsibility than to be there for people on the worst day of their life. It must be done well.*
>
> — Bob VandePol

Timeline: The Path to the Act, 1995–1997

June 20, 1995 — NTSB Chairman Jim Hall and Transportation Secretary Federico Peña meet with families of USAir 427, American Eagle 4184, USAir 5050, and USAir 405; the meeting produces the outline of concerns that becomes the blueprint for the Act.

November 11, 1995 — Families and survivors from seven crashes, including Northwest 255, Pan Am 103, United 232, USAir 427, USAir 405, USAir 5050, and American Eagle 4184, meet in Pittsburgh and found the National Air Disaster Alliance and the National Air Disaster Foundation.

May 11, 1996 — ValuJet Flight 592 crashes in the Florida Everglades; all 110 aboard are killed.

June 19, 1996 — The House Aviation Subcommittee holds a hearing on post-crash treatment of families; family members from Pan Am 103, ValuJet 592, and American Eagle 4184 testify.

July 17, 1996 — TWA Flight 800 crashes off Long Island; all 230 aboard are killed.

July 31, 1996 — The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure introduces the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 (H.R. 3923).

August 22, 1996 — President Clinton establishes the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security, chaired by Vice President Al Gore, which takes up post-accident treatment of families.

September 5, 1996 — Congress holds hearings on the bill; families from Pan Am 103, American Eagle 4184, and TWA 800 testify alongside NTSB Chairman Jim Hall.

September 9, 1996 — The Gore Commission submits its initial report, including recommendations on post-accident care.

September 18, 1996 — The House passes the Act 104–4; the Senate folds it into the FAA reauthorization package and approves it unanimously.

October 9, 1996 — President Clinton signs the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act into law.

November 1996 — The NTSB formally notifies all domestic airlines of their duty to create an emergency response plan under the Act.

November 20, 1996 — Families from ten aviation disasters testify before the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security: TWA 800, ValuJet 592, U.S. Air Force CT-43A, American Eagle 4184, USAir 427, USAir 1493, USAir 5050, United 232, Pan Am 103, and Korean Air Lines 007.

February 1997 — The Gore Commission's final report credits the NTSB's progress and urges faster implementation and increased funding.

April 9, 1997 — The NTSB issues its first Federal Family Assistance Plan for Aviation Disasters.

August 6, 1997 — Korean Air Flight 801 crashes in Guam, heightening family assistance awareness among international carriers.

September-November 1997 — The House introduces the Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act; the Senate approves it by unanimous consent in mid-November.

October 29, 1997 — The Task Force on Assistance to Families of Aviation Disasters, whose members included families from TWA 800, USAir 427, and American Eagle 4184 and a survivor from USAir 405, submits its final report to Vice President Gore and Congress, with 61 recommendations.

December 1997 — President Clinton signs the Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act, extending the Act's requirements to foreign carriers serving the U.S.

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