

Ideally, the Family Assistance Centre will be near a green space to allow for quiet reflection and for walk and talks with support responders. It will be fully stocked with refreshments, activity materials and games for children and youth, and have reliable internet connections and charging stations.

Once the Family Assistance Centre is up and running it is necessary to continually assess its effectiveness to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the family and friends of MCI victims



How is the family assistance centre operationalized?

The multi-operational needs of service providers and users of the Family Assistance Centre will determine the floor plan and people flow. Generally, there are several operational units:

- Administration Work Area to provide a secure work space separate from the family and friends area
- Family Registration for arriving family and friends to register, log in/out, and receive information on available support services and community resources
- Family Gathering area for family and friends to share information, refreshments, and support

- Interview Area for private interactions between service providers and the family and friends of victims of the MCI
- Childcare Area for secure and supervised care of children
- Reflection Area for family and friends as well as service providers to reflect, mediate, pray, observe religious practices, or just be quiet

Who should be included in a family assistance centre?

In addition to victim service practitioners and disaster psychosocial services volunteers, staff at the Family Assistance Centre might include emergency management services, first responder liaisons, health and mental health practitioners, and representatives from the coroner services, from government social services, from the voluntary sector (Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc.), and from faith communities. To respond effectively to the unique attributes of the victims and their family and friends, you might also include child and youth specialists, seniors' advocates, bi-cultural interpreters and/or language translators, pet-care providers, and funeral directors.

Research has shown that on average, for very victim or casualty in a MCI, six to ten family members and friends will need information or support during and following a MCI. Ideally one Family Assistance Centre worker should be assigned to support each victims' circle of family members or friends.

Establishing a Family Assistance Centre in Mass Casualty Incidents

A safe and private space for family and friends



What is a family assistance centre?

A Family Assistance Centre is a secure facility established to provide comprehensive and coordinated services to the family and friends of victims of a mass casualty incident (MCI). Services provided include information, emotional support, health and human services, coroner services, and reunification.



Because time is often required to establish a fully operational Family Assistance Centre, immediately after the MCI, the centre may be started up with just the basic services – information, emotional support and refreshments.

Why establish a family assistance centre?

In addition to facilitating operational efficiencies for service providers (first responders, support responders such as victim and disaster psychosocial services, and health and social services), the Family Assistance Centre provides a safe haven for the family and friends of victims. Importantly, it can provide a place for quiet reflection, offering and support from those experiencing fears, meeting with trauma or grief counsellors, or escaping the media blitz.

Supporting the family and friends of victims of the MCI

When the incident is known (through the mainstream media, social media, or communication with victims), family and friends as well as the public are going to arrive on the scene quickly. People fear what they do not know; your actions can be calming and can improve confidence and reduce stress for family and friends.

Victim Service Practitioners and Disaster Psychosocial Personnel at a family assistance centre work closely with first responders and Emergency Management Services to provide a variety of services to the family and friends of the victims of a MCI. These include:

- Providing accurate information and timely updates on what is happening
- Validating and clarifying any information they may have heard and/or received
- Educating family on safety and wellness and ensuring there are refreshments available for their self-care
- Connecting family with victims by phone, text, or assisting with reunification after the MCI

In the case of fatalities, staff may also work with the coroner service to provide identity data (including personal features and anti-mortem DNA).

What are critical considerations for establishing the family assistance centre?

A **family-focused approach** will enable service responders to collaborate across mandates and jurisdictions to best meet the many needs of family and friends both as a group with shared concerns and as individuals with unique needs. Thus, there are structural, operational, and

procedural considerations that must be identified and addressed once a decision is made to establish the Family Assistance Centre. These include:

- **Location:** It should be close to the MCI scene to allow responders to travel easily between the scene and the Centre for briefings and for respite care. Family and friends should be protected from viewing any destructive or traumatic aspects of the scene until support responders have prepared them to do so or until first responders have “cleared” the scene for several days beyond the MCI conclusion.
- **Safety & Security:** Access to the building should be controlled (particularly from the media).
- **Physical Set-Up:** It should accommodate persons with disabilities and provide space for refreshments and other comforts to be provided.



- **Operational Set-Up:** Focus on a multi-jurisdictional approach to meeting the needs of the family and friends of the victims. The centre will enable fast and effective communication with responders at the MCI scene.
- **Procedural Processes:** Focus on smooth operations and partnerships to best meet the needs of family and friends—in the absence of these processes, chaos may surface and further traumatize or disillusion the family and friends.