



State of Louisiana
Cemetery Response Task Force
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Ryan M. Seidemann, J.D., Ph.D., R.P.A.
Chairman

Cemetery Response Task Force
Meeting Minutes
December 2, 2022

Members Present:

Ryan M. Seidemann – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Member
Gustave Lehmann – Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) Member
Ginesse Listi – LSU FACES Laboratory (FACES) Member
Jerry W. Sullivan – Louisiana Cemetery Board (LCB) Member
Amy Dawson – Governor’s Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP), Member

Others Present:

Christine Halling – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Designee

Members Absent:

C. Shane Evans – Louisiana Coroners Association (LCA) Designee

1. Meeting Start time: 12:00 PM

Chair Seidemann introduced the new LCB member, Jerry W. Sullivan and provided information regarding the LCB’s past member, Lucy L. McCann’s retirement and resignation from the Task Force.

2. Past Minutes:

The May 2022 and December 2021 minutes were reviewed and, on motion of Amy Dawson (GOHSEP) and second of Gustave Lehmann (LDH), both sets of minutes were unanimously approved.

3. Old business:

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported on Laura/Delta/Zeta response data. He first discussed the Zeta response and noted that the two cemeteries known to have sustained damages during that storm opted to exercise their right to handle the necessary response work.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that Laura/Delta is, from the CRTF’s position, coming to a close. The CRTF role, following the closure of claim submissions earlier in 2022 for both of those storms. The CRTF’s job now is making sure that claimants receive funds, pay contractors, and that the work for which FEMA paid funds is completed. In total, \$2,069,558.22 was paid to claimants for Laura cemetery damages and \$574,374.31 was paid to claimants for Delta cemetery damages.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that FEMA changed course regarding what it would fund in the way of cemetery repairs from including grave marker repair within grave repairs, to not allowing for such grave marker repair. As a practical matter, this undermined the CRTF's trustworthiness in the public's eyes. No real explanation for this change in protocol was provided by FEMA. The CRTF contemplated filing suit against FEMA for the seemingly arbitrary and capricious change, but decided against it due to mediation requirements and standing problems. Meanwhile the CRTF has submitted multiple FOIA requests to FEMA seeking clarity on this change in process. Those requests remain outstanding.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported on the progress of identification work during Laura/Delta, noting that the numbers of remains to be identified began with 5 semi trailers full of unidentified caskets, condensed to 3 trailers full of uncasketed remains. Identifications were made during the decasketing process, leaving the CRTF with 18 recovered but unidentified sets of human remains from Laura/Delta. These 18 sets of remains were analyzed by LSU and CRTF personnel, resulting in another 5 positive and 2 potential identifications. The final 12 sets of remains will require additional analysis to try to identify them. This final analysis will be undertaken to try to winnow the numbers of unidentified remains further. Ultimately, some of the remains will not be able to be identified and will ultimately be returned to their parish of origin (Cameron) for the purposes of reinterment as unidentified individuals. Dr. Listi (LSU) inquired as to whether there was a component of NamUs that incorporated disaster data. Chair Seidemann (DOJ) responded that he was not aware of this, but that he would investigate this issue. Chair Seidemann also reported that there have been supply delays causing slow-downs in the cemetery response for Laura/Delta, but that things seem to be moving along.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that, with regard to the 2016 Floods, there is, in Bogalusa, one grave that needs to be repaired to fully complete the 2016 Flood response. He also reported that the Macedonia Freewill Church in Independence has completed its lagging cemetery work from the 2016 Floods. Chair Seidemann (DOJ) also reported that the records from the 2016 Floods will ultimately be transmitted to the State Archives for permanent curation. There was also general discussion among Chair Seidemann (DOJ), Jerry Sullivan (LCB), and Christine Halling (DOJ) regarding the funding process and procedural safeguards for funding that is diverted by the claimants.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that 760 graves were documented as damaged by casket dislodged or damaged. He also reported that the recovered remains are being held in Plaquemines Parish (6 trailers) and Jefferson Parish (4 trucks). Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the reasons for the trailers is to secure the remains and to make them mobile for evacuations. Such evacuations occurred for the Laura/Delta remains twice—once to Lake Charles and once to Wildlife & Fisheries property. Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported on the difficulty of staging recovered remains in Jefferson Parish. He also reported on the progress of funding from FEMA for Ida repairs. FEMA has, to date, paid out \$936,695.50 for Ida cemetery repairs under the Individual Assistance process. Amy Dawson (GOHSEP), Chair Seidemann (DOJ), and Christine Halling (DOJ) discussed the complexities of managing FEMA in the Ida response. Decasketing and identification work for Ida will begin after the end of the claims-submission period. During the Ida discussion, Chair Seidemann and Mr. Sullivan (LCB) discussed the Good Samaritan funding process.

3. New business:

No new business regarding actual storm damage due to the lack of storms in 2022.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported on a recent Embalmers and Funeral Directors meeting in which there was discussion, and much confusion, regarding the post-Katrina-mandated identification. Ms. Halling (DOJ), Dr. Listi (FACES), and Mr. Sullivan participated in this discussion. Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that the CRTF has backlogged complaints for the Funeral Board regarding lack of identification. He also asked the Task Force for the authority to engage with the Funeral Board's regulations drafting committee in order to work with that entity to craft specific identification rules. Dr. Listi (FACES) made the motion to authorize this engagement and Ms. Dawson (GOHSEP) seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) asked for a roll call vote to add an item to the agenda: CRTF officially reach out to the Louisiana congressional delegation for assistance regarding FEMA's changing decisions on coverage of certain claims. On a motion of Ms. Dawson (GOHSEP) and second by Dr. Listi (FACES) to amend the agenda (roll call: Dawson-yea; Listi-yea; Sullivan-yea; Lehmann-yea) the agenda was amended to add the afore-mentioned item. Chair Seidemann (DOJ) sought a motion from the Task Force authorizing him, as chairman of the Task Force to send a letter to each member of the Louisiana congressional delegation asking them to support a request to FEMA to implement a formal policy that includes grave marker repair and replacement within the category of items covered by Individual Assistance's cemetery repair funding. Ms. Dawson (GOHSEP) so moved and Gustave Lehmann (LDH) seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

4. Next meeting:

Unknown at this time. Members will gauge availability and set up the next meeting at a later date.

5. Adjourn

Ms. Dawson (GOHSEP) moved to adjourn the meeting and Mr. Lehmann (LDH) seconded. The motion was unanimously passed and the meeting was adjourned at 1:14 PM.