

# LOS ANGELES COUNTY OPERATIONAL AREA FAMILY ASSISTANCE CENTER PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



*Mission: To provide a place for families of disaster victims to obtain information about their loved ones, and obtain emotional, social and other support services.*

MARCH 2010

This project is led and funded by the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health.

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The Los Angeles County Operational Area one of the nation's largest counties by population and area. Diverse and expansive, the Operational Area is also subject to a number of natural and human-caused hazards, including threats from earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, terrorism and numerous others. Continuing its long-standing commitment to emergency planning and preparedness, the Operational Area has embarked on an ambitious Family Assistance Center (FAC) planning effort to enhance its readiness for both large and small-scale disasters.

A. BACKGROUND

In the immediate aftermath of a mass fatality incident (MFI) or mass casualty incident (MCI), families will seek assistance. They will gravitate to where they believe they will find their loved one or where they believe they will be able to obtain information about them. That may translate to the incident site or local hospitals (e.g., families may perceive that their loved ones are injured and have been transported to the nearest hospital). A surge of people at the incident site or hospitals can significantly impact and possibly hinder life saving operations. Experts in many fields including emergency management, public safety, medical services, mental health and victim assistance therefore recommended that Los Angeles County establish an Operational Area FAC Plan to aid the disaster response.

*The Family Assistance Center model is a new and dynamic concept, especially as it pertains to implementation at the Operational Area level, led by government agencies.*

*The completion of this Operational Area plan will mark the first of its kind in the Nation.*

The establishment of a FAC can help to alleviate these issues and better aid responders and support personnel to provide victim's families with the support and information they need. Family assistance is one of the most sensitive and complex operations in MFI/MCI response. FACs are the only type of assistance center to open immediately after an emergency as part of response while still offering specialty support functions. The need for multiagency coordination in plan development is further underscored as multiple agencies and organizations fold under the response umbrella and begin to leverage the services provided via FACs. The challenges increase as family assistance staff work with families of differing cultures and beliefs – as such, family assistance must be provided in a way that is sensitive to the diverse population of Los Angeles County.

B. WHAT IS A FAC?

The FAC provides two types of benefits for families of victims:

- Information: This includes notifying families of the status of the victim (e.g., whether the victim is a decedent, has been transported to a hospital, or is still missing). This will also include the provision of updates regarding incident recovery efforts.
- Services: This includes the provision of emotional support, spiritual care, health and social services.

### C. PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

This Los Angeles County Operational Area FAC Plan was developed based on the FAC model utilized for aviation-related disasters designated under the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 in coordination with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). This model employs best practices that have been continuously enhanced through implementation at aviation disasters throughout the U.S.<sup>1</sup> While plans were in existence that specified the provision of FAC services in the event of an aviation disaster, there was no plan that outlined the provision of FAC services for other types of disasters. Using best practices derived from the NTSB model, the Los Angeles County Operational Area FAC Plan was designed to fill this gap – covering the provision of FAC services for a majority of disasters.

### D. SCOPE

The scope of the plan includes activation, operation, and demobilization strategies for FACs within the Los Angeles County Operational Area (covering all 88 cities and unincorporated areas). As such, the plan seeks to provide a framework for establishing and managing FACs in the Operational Area during both large-scale MFI/MCIs (e.g., earthquakes) and smaller, more localized incidents involving multiple fatalities/casualties (e.g., explosion, shooting) to ensure consistency of response and management, and to establish a baseline of service.

The plan provides a structure and practice for city and County agencies/departments working within the FAC. **Cities will modify the staffing of these functions based on the unique attributes of their city and the availability of local resources.** Special consideration has been given to the identification of plan activation requirements, maximum/minimum services offered based on incident size and availability of resources, delineation of roles and responsibilities of each agency/organization, treatment and accommodation of specific needs populations, coordination of support services, information management and the like. Care was also taken to ensure that city- and County- initiated FAC activation and operation protocols were outlined.

### E. OBJECTIVES

FAC operations are designed to meet the following objectives:

- Provide accurate and timely information to the family and friends of victims (referred to as “clients”) regarding the incident.
- Provide a mechanism to coordinate efforts between law enforcement, EMS, and coroner personnel to facilitate identification of victim status and client notification.
- Provide emotional support and spiritual care services to clients.
- Facilitate the provision of additional health and social services based on the type of incident and available resources.
- Establish a secure and appropriate facility that allows agencies to interact sensitively and effectively with clients.

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<sup>1</sup> The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act was amended in 2008 to include passenger rail accidents that involve a “major loss of life”.

F. PLAN ORGANIZATION:

The plan is organized into two primary components, further sub-divided into major Sections.

- **BASE PLAN:** Provides an overview of the Los Angeles County Operational Area FAC model and overall approach to FAC management. This includes National Incident Management System (NIMS)/Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS)/Incident Command System (ICS)–based reporting and organization during a disaster and a matrix of organizations and areas of responsibility (including functions) to show primary and supporting roles at a glance. This Base Plan is organized by Section, which are divided by subject area to allow for quick reference.
- **APPENDICES:** Addresses responsibilities, tasks and operational actions for coordinating resource and programmatic support within a FAC during an incident. These include program-level Standard Operating Procedures, policy, and position checklists that outline the types of tasks that are to be performed. Plan appendices also outline FAC logistical considerations, to include infrastructure, entry and egress route considerations, information technology resources, security, and proximity to major highways, and rooms for briefing, counseling and investigation.

G. PLAN DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES

Two training and exercise events were included as part of the plan development phase of this project – one workshop and one seminar/demonstration. Training and exercise events provided an opportunity for participants to become familiar with the activation and operation of the plan, as well as to identify planning gaps that need to be addressed. An After-Action Report was prepared based on exercise findings to outline strengths to be expanded upon, and gaps and areas for improvement within the plan. The plan was revised based on approved recommendations from participants.

- **WORKSHOP:** A workshop was conducted with Steering Committee members and select Operational Area stakeholders to review the draft plan for enhancement and revision. The workshop included a presentation of the FAC model and pertinent elements of the draft plan. Participants were then given an opportunity to review and provide feedback on the plan through guided facilitation.
- **SEMINAR AND DEMONSTRATION:** The seminar and demonstration provided a presentation of the revised plan and offered a walking tour of a FAC. The FAC was setup to the greatest extent possible – stations, signage, and all other materials were on display as they would be for a FAC in full operation.