

Mass Fatality Scene Processing: Best Practice Recommendations for the Medicolegal Authority



WHAT IS AN AAFS STANDARD FACTSHEET?

The AAFS produces clear, concise, and easy-to-understand factsheets to summarize the contents of technical and professional forensic science standards on the OSAC Registry. They are not intended to provide an interpretation for any portion of a published standard.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STANDARD?

This standard provides definitions, guidelines, and best practices for the detection, processing, and recovery of physical and contextual evidence associated with mass fatality disaster scenes to ensure that evidence is carefully and consistently documented and recovered in situ.

The recommendations promote the use of appropriate strategies for the search and documentation of a scene, including the recovery of human remains, personal effects, and other probative evidence. The chain-of-custody of all items must be maintained, and all areas associated with the scene must be processed systematically. The document is focused on strategies for terrestrial scenes.

WHY IS THIS STANDARD IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

Identification of decedents begins in the field, and the quality of work at the recovery scene can directly influence the overall success of the victim identification process at the disaster morgue.

Employing appropriate search and recovery strategies maximizes the amount of human remains and evidentiary material recovered, retains valuable contextual information, and maintains the chain-of-custody.

Failure to adequately search for and recover human remains from the start can result in inefficient use of resources and cause unnecessary delays and emotional harm to families.

HOW IS THIS STANDARD USED, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

The recommended best practices cover the scope of topics from overall management perspectives to specific processing steps.

1. Outlines overall management perspectives for medicolegal professionals and lists critical factors to consider prior to the start of recovery operations.
2. Discussion of organizational considerations, such as jurisdiction, management, and post-incident assessment.
3. Emphasis on pre-incident planning, including necessary elements of a search and recovery plan, activation criteria, and training.
4. Stresses the importance of efforts to determine the scope of the incident and the context for remains' recovery to guide planning decisions.
5. Delineates the process for establishing a unique field numbering system.
6. Provides examples of effective and efficient search and recovery strategies for a variety of scenarios (e.g., large scenes vs. concentrated/commingled remains).
7. Provides procedures for search, investigation, excavation, mapping, photography, collection, transport, and intake of remains.
8. Includes a comprehensive list of practices that are deemed unacceptable.

