

Client Bulletin

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The Airline's Emergency Response: Keeping Your Family Assistance Plan Up-To-Date

Since June of 1998, foreign air carriers operating into the United States have been required to comply with the provisions of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act, 49 U.S.C. § 41313. Most carriers filed the required family assistance plans in 1998. Fortunately, the aviation industry has been relatively accident free and it has been nearly five and a half years since the last major aviation disaster on U.S. soil. Given the substantial U.S. staff cutbacks in the offices of many foreign air carriers, this spring may be a good time for review of existing Family Assistance Plans to make certain that those Plans still fit the needs of the airline in the event of an airline disaster.

Below are some questions to ask when reviewing a Family Assistance Plan:

- (1) Is there enough personnel ready to staff an emergency? Due to personnel cutbacks, airline staff members who were slotted to fill certain positions in the event of an emergency may no longer be available. If the airline cannot provide family assistance itself, it should consider contracting with either another airline, *e.g.*, a code share partner, or with one of the third party providers of disaster response services who are prepared to assist in emergencies.
- (2) Is there accurate and relevant contact information in place? The Family Assistance Act requires the airline to liaison with the NTSB Foreign Relations Office as soon as possible and provide a passenger list to the Director of Family Assistance within three hours after a disaster. Passenger manifests also must be delivered to the State Department as well as the Red Cross. The airline is required to advise the NTSB communications center of the place of the accident, number of passengers and crew, number of injured and fatalities, whether the flight was domestic or international, the name and phone number of the person from the airline who is in overall charge of the accident site, the name and location of the hotel that has been designated as the joint family support operations center and the person at the airline responsible for family notification.
- (3) Are plans in place to handle calls to the toll-free telephone numbers? One of the tasks which must be immediately accomplished in the event of an accident is providing the public with a reliable toll free number with sufficient telephone capacity to field calls from the public inquiring about loved ones. Simply having toll-free telephone numbers is not sufficient; there must be skilled attendants available to handle the telephones who are trained in dealing with passengers' families and who can respond calmly in the event of an emergency. Relief plans should be in place so attendants have adequate opportunity for rest and "decompression".
- (4) Is the airline "Go Team" ready to proceed to an accident site? The airline must have technically qualified personnel who can proceed to an accident site to assist the NTSB in the investigation. When the NTSB investigates a major aviation accident, teams are formed for various discrete functions such as flight operations, human factors, flight data recorder analysis, cockpit voice recorder and maintenance. It is important that the airline have skilled and trained personnel who are able to assist the NTSB and fill out these teams.
- (5) Is the airline ready to attend to its daily business in the event of an aviation disaster? Airline management must be prepared to have one person in charge of the accident investigation with an appropriate number of support people. However, the airline must be prepared and able to continue with its business operations, *i.e.*, flying passengers. It is of no benefit to the airline if the entire organization shuts down because of an accident. Good management and emergency response

procedures require that those employees not involved in the accident support/investigation keep doing their jobs to ensure the financial survival and viability of the airline.

In short, it is time for spring cleaning . . . look at your emergency response plan, make certain that it is still in compliance with the Department of Transportation requirements and have an emergency drill at least annually to make sure that everyone in your organization knows their responsibilities and is equipped to carry them out in the unlikely event of an aviation disaster.

Good management requires being prepared for the unprepared. As legendary basketball Coach John Wooden said “Failing to prepare is preparing to fail”. Be prepared!



If you have any questions or would like further information, please contact:

Michael J. Holland, Esq.
Condon & Forsyth LLP
Times Square Tower
7 Times Square
New York, NY 10036
Tel: (212) 894-6740
Fax: (212) 370-4482
E-mail: mholland@condonlaw.com