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In Wake of Manchester Attack, Florida Responders Practice Emergency Protocol At Annual Training

By ISABELLA CUETO • 13 HOURS AGO

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A U.S. Army decontamination team participates in a simulated disaster site exercise during the annual Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System training.

ISABELLA CUETO / WLRN NEWS

Following any deadly tragedy, most recently the Manchester terror attack, emergency response goes from behind-the-scenes work to a tangible presence.

Florida is one of a few states to have its own team of professionals trained to respond to disasters: the Florida Emergency Mortuary Operations Response System (FEMORS). Members spent Tuesday and Wednesday at the annual preparedness exercise, ensuring FEMORS could deliver a swift and seamless helping hand if needed.

Physicians, forensic scientists and members of the U.S. Army and National Guard spent hours practicing how to conduct a large-scale emergency response, from disaster site recovery operations to victim identification and cataloging.

A gymnasium at the Miami-Dade College North Campus was segmented into stations including anthropology, fingerprinting, DNA collection, triage and forensic photography. Outside, responders ran exercises in a mock disaster site, passing the "remains" from one team to the next, until they reached the identification center. In a real disaster, the identification center would work with next of kin to identify remains and reunite the families.

The event was organized by FEMORS, which was created in 2002 by the state of Florida in collaboration with the University of Florida's William R. Maples Center for Forensic Medicine to aid medical examiners in the aftermath of mass fatality incidents. FEMORS is a branch of the national Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams (DMORT) framework, and was one of the first state teams in the country.

Heather Walsh-Haney is the FEMORS anthropology team leader and an associate professor of human identification and trauma analysis at Florida Gulf Coast University. She was one of the first team members of FEMORS and has responded to numerous tragedies through the years, including the ValuJet airplane crash 21 years ago in the Everglades.

In the case of mass fatality, Walsh-Haney said, having anthropologists on the scene is crucial to identify bodies. By analyzing the bones of a victim, forensic anthropologists can learn more about the day-to-day habits of the person, like if they carried a heavy backpack or were a smoker, which in turn helps match skeletal remains to the narrative created by other agencies and the medical examiners through records.

"Those little extras that an anthropologist knows to look for that help flesh out the picture of who the individual is," she said.

Walsh-Haney said FEMORS training keeps the team running smoothly, even on years when there are no disasters, and helps create a rapport that is necessary when jumping into an interdisciplinary emergency response situation – because everyone knows one another, the team can get to work and skip the introductions.

"By having this practice, we're getting ourselves ready for tragedies like Manchester, that we never want to think about happening," she said. "And by practicing, we get to know each other and we get the stress of meeting out of the way. "

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