



State of Louisiana
Cemetery Response Task Force
P.O. Box 94005
Baton Rouge
70804-9005

Ryan M. Seidemann, J.D., Ph.D., R.P.A.
Chairman

Cemetery Response Task Force
Meeting Minutes
May 15, 2023

Members Present:

Ryan M. Seidemann – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Member
Gustave Lehmann – Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) Member (arrived at 10:18 AM; did not impact quorum at beginning)
Ginesse Listi – LSU FACES Laboratory (FACES) Member
Jerry W. Sullivan – Louisiana Cemetery Board (LCB) Member
Rubby Douglas – Governor’s Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP), Member

Others Present:

Christine Halling – Louisiana Department of Justice (LDOJ) Designee
Arbie Goings – Goings Consulting Services, Inc., Mass Fatality Lead, Contractor to LDH
Sarah Gunsch – Federal Emergency Management Administration (via Zoom)

Members Absent:

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

1. Meeting Start time: 10:07 AM

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) called the meeting to order at 10:10 AM, though introductions began at 10:07 AM. A quorum was present.

2. Past Minutes:

The December 2023 minutes were reviewed and, on motion of Ginesse Listi (FACES) and second of Rubby Douglas (GOHSEP), the 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 closeout of recovery and reinterment. Any FEMA funds have been distributed to families and from the families to the relevant contractors for repair and reinterment completion.

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that a public records request was made recently for identities of contractors that the CRTF has worked with. He reminded the membership that the CRTF does

not contract with the repair contractors and that those are selected by families or cemetery authorities, but that the CRTF coordinates with the contractors to obtain estimates for IA claims in order to attest to the veracity of the claim and to monitor the progress of the repair work that is paid for by the claimants both to ensure proper completion and in order to release human remains for reinterment as needed. Nonetheless, a review of CRTF's records revealed that a total of 41 distinct contractors had been coordinated with by the CRTF across Hurricanes Laura, Delta, and Ida. This did not include the numbers of contractors coordinated with for the 2016 Floods because that predated the creation of the CRTF. These contractors were not limited to any specific geographic area, but the bulk were located in South Louisiana, with some in Central and North Louisiana and one in East Texas.

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) also indicated that many of the smaller contractors for Laura/Delta have mentioned that they may not be willing to work on future disasters because of the red tape and bureaucracy involved. He also reported that the majority of the repair work was moving at a proper pace with one exception. Christine Halling (LDOJ) reported that there are between 11-15 unidentified individuals from Laura/Delta and that the variation in numbers is attributable to partial identification information associated with some of the individuals that may allow for their reinterment with some identifiers, but not with a definitive identity. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) indicated that these unidentified were held in a single semi trailer at GOHSEP's Airline Highway location in Baton Rouge where they had been brought for identification work but that they would soon be returned to the CRTF staging area in Creole when the GOHSEP lease on the Airline facility ended. He also reported that these individuals will mostly be reinterred in a public cemetery in Cameron Parish as individual unidentifieds. Others that can be associated with particular cemeteries will be reinterred in those locations as unidentifieds. The reinterments and vaults have already been paid for with FEMA funds, so now it is merely a logistical transfer. Ms. Douglas (GOHSEP) inquired into the timeline for releasing the Laura/Delta remains and Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that it was anticipated to still be a few months.

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that one of the Laura/Delta contractors has turned out to be a large problem. According to information provided by the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's Office, this contractor has misappropriated approximately \$250,000.00 in cemetery repair funds provided to him by families for Laura/Delta repairs as well as, allegedly and based upon conversations with individual families, additional funding for cemetery work provided by these people. The families have indicated that the contractor has a gambling problem and that the funds were gambled away. He stressed that this is not a problem with the families not remitting funds to the contractor but rather that the contractor is not doing the work. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) and Ms. Halling (LDOJ) have field-checked approximately 90% of the graves for which this contractor was paid to repair and have confirmed that the repair work has largely not been done. He suspects that the repairs that were completed were done out of private funds from frustrated families and not by the contractor. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that he is assembling materials on this apparent fraud to provide to the Calcasieu Parish District Attorney to support criminal charges that are already pending against this contractor. Those materials will have to be redacted to eliminate information covered by FEMA's Privacy Rule mandates. On legal review of the situation, the CRTF has determined that this situation is not one of FEMA fraud under the U.S. Attorney's/FBI's jurisdiction because the families did not defraud FEMA. Rather, it is a local criminal matter. Jerry

Sullivan (LCB) inquired as to the outcome in the event that law enforcement could not recover the funds. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that the CRTF is equipped to make the majority of the types of repairs that this contractor was paid for and that this work would be done by CRTF personnel as time permits. Ms. Halling (LDOJ) reported that the possibility of this situation being worse was minimized because this contractor could really only undertake tombstone repairs and resets. Thus, not a lot of massive undertakings were involved in this debacle. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) indicated that this contractor submitted estimates for tombstone repairs during a time when FEMA was approving such work, meaning that the work to be done is small per-grave. Mr. Sullivan (LCB) asked whether this contractor's lack of work will impact reinterment and Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) answered that they should not. Ms. Halling (LDOJ) noted that the time that has passed since this alleged fraud occurred may have caused some additional weathering problems to the impacted graves, but she also agreed that no remains would be impacted by this problem. Mr. Sullivan (LCB) inquired as to whether any contractor bonding was required and Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported in the negative. In addition, the Chairman reported that it is not necessarily bad that bonding and licensure is not required, as there are very few bonded and licensed contractors in Louisiana who also do cemetery work. If the bonding and licensing was required, it could stymie the majority of repair work in disaster situations.

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that the 2016 Floods were completed in 2023 after seven years of work. The topic will not be on the agenda again.

Chair Seidemann (DOJ) reported that all of the Ida unidentifieds were removed to Baton Rouge for forensic analysis with the assistance of FACES. Some positive identifications were made immediately during the process and individuals will join the rest of the identified remains that are awaiting release for reinterment either because of contractor backlogs or families not yet having transmitted their FEMA funds to the contractors. He also reported that, in Plaquemines Parish, Ironton Community Cemetery is the most complex single site and that, because of the number of disruptions, the recovery work is being done in phases. The recovery work at this site is being done by pouring cement slabs and then bolting cement vaults to the slabs. Mr. Sullivan (LCB) and Ms. Halling (LDOJ) discussed the logistics of the process of securing the vaults in Ironton. Ms. Halling (LDOJ) also reported that permanent identification is placed in the casket, on the casket, and then there will be granite markers affixed to the exterior of the vaults, making for triple identification. Mr. Sullivan (LCB), Ms. Halling (LDOJ), and Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) discussed the fact that Ironton Cemetery is not a licensed cemetery with the LCB and that that will have to be addressed once the repair work is completed. The licensure problem from the 2016 Floods was discussed in the context of how to handle these licensure matters for Ida impacted cemeteries. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that the Ironton unidentified remains have been returned to the community and that the Jefferson remains will be returned to the Harvey staging area shortly. He also reported that some of the funding problems are still being worked between families and FEMA, further delaying some reinterments.

3. New business:

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that the 2023 storm season was expected to be mild due to an El Niño event. He optimistically indicated that another no-storm season should allow for

substantial progress towards the completion of the Laura/Delta and Ida recovery work. Ms. Douglas (GOHSEP) contributed to the discussion of storm expectations for 2023.

Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported vague information from FEMA that that entity is reconsidering whether to manage cemetery recovery through the Public Assistance or Individual Assistance program. Not much is known on this topic at the moment and Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) indicated that additional discussions with FEMA are anticipated in the coming months.

Mr. Sullivan (LCB) inquired about whether the Louisiana Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors have engaged with the CRTF about the legally mandated reporting of identification post-Katrina. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that there is much confusion at the board level on this matter, including whether the identification should be placed internally or externally on caskets. He indicated that the law is clear that the information is to be placed externally, but that the board members did not all seem to understand that reality. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that he would soon offer to work with the board on any regulatory drafting relating to the identification.

Ms. Douglas (GOHSEP) indicated that it was her belief that the public is largely unaware that the cemetery disruption problems managed by the CRTF even exist. She proposed educating local governments about the problem and the CRTF's availability. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that he had recently presented on the CRTF at a Louisiana justices of the peace and constables meeting and that Arbie Goings' annual trainings through the Department of Health has been able to reach out to coroners and local OEPs about the CRTF. Ms. Douglas (GOHSEP) also inquired about whether there was a way to bring in anthropology or geography students to undertake cemetery mapping in advance of storms. Ms. Halling (LDOJ) reported that discussions with FEMA have been had about conducting trainings to cover preparedness, legal responsibilities, mapping, and the role of the CRTF. She reported that FEMA has not identified a proper entity to manage such a program despite the probability that FEMA grants are available for such activities. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) indicated that the CRTF can restart an inquiry into this training once Ida response has settled down a bit. Ms. Halling (LDOJ) reported that she has had some discussions with River Parishes Community College about creating some student-level mapping. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) noted that the University of New Orleans also has a strong mapping program and that such projects could be undertaken as service learning course work. Chair Seidemann (LDOJ) reported that the Louisiana GIS Council may be approached to form a working group to develop a higher education program for mapping cemeteries.

4. Next meeting:

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

5. Adjourn

Ms. Douglas (GOHSEP) moved to adjourn the meeting and Dr. Listi (FACES) seconded. The motion was unanimously passed and the meeting was adjourned at 11:09 AM.