

Forensics on Call

A new Texas response team, born in Houston, is ready to react to the state's mass fatalities

BY ALEXANDRA BECKER



Garrett Phillips, M.D., left, an assistant medical examiner for the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS), stands with Jason Wiersema, Ph.D., the director of forensic anthropology and emergency management at HCIFS.

Garrett Phillips, M.D., received an urgent phone call on the evening of Saturday, Aug. 3, 2019. Since mid-morning, national news outlets had been reporting on a mass shooting at an El Paso Wal-Mart—one of the deadliest in modern United States history. Ultimately, 22 people were killed in the attack.

Phillips, a physician and assistant medical examiner for the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS), had a brief conversation. When he ended the call, he packed a bag.

He was heading to El Paso.

Early the next morning, Phillips met two HCIFS colleagues and an autopsy assistant from Galveston County at Hobby Airport in Houston. The group flew to El Paso and connected with another autopsy assistant from Collin County, just north of Dallas. That day, those five individuals made up the first official Texas Mass Fatality Operations Response Team—a new, statewide, around-the-clock response group for death investigations and forensic support, known as TMORT for short.

“We hit the ground running,” Phillips said. “We got a quick orientation and started doing autopsies.”

The idea for TMORT was first hatched by Jason Wiersema, Ph.D., the director of forensic anthropology and emergency management at HCIFS. Wiersema had a storied career responding to mass fatality incidents; he worked at mass grave sites in Bosnia, in New York City after 9/11 and in New Orleans during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Designing a program from the ground up, however, was a new challenge for the forensic anthropologist.

“I didn’t really know what to do, so I started reaching out to the county resources and to the city and it quickly became evident that I couldn’t write a mass fatality preparedness plan for our office—that it has to be the county,” Wiersema said. “But then, as I started talking to people in the county, it became obvious that it would have to be the county *and* the city, since we serve both.”

The more Wiersema learned, the more the project’s scope expanded. Soon, the plan was slated to serve the entire state of Texas, in part because resources vary so widely from region to region.

“The death investigation system

in Texas is extremely variable in capability,” Wiersema said, adding that Harris County has the largest medical examiner’s office in the state, with nearly 300 employees.

“We have 60 staff just in investigations alone, so those are the people that go to the scenes and do really detailed death investigations. ... That’s 24 hours a day. We have 17 or 18 pathologists conducting autopsies, four anthropologists, we’ve got toxicology, drug chemistry, DNA trace evidence, histology—doing the job that, in a neighboring county, has to be done by only one person,” Wiersema explained. “And that one person may not have any training at all

“ There’s this misconception that we’re just picking up bodies and transporting them, but it’s so much more than that, and I think that’s part of what is so valuable about TMORT. It’s going and doing real forensic science. ”

— JASON WIERSEMA, PH.D.

Director of forensic anthropology and emergency management at Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences

in forensics or medicine. They’re tasked with the same thing, of course on a much smaller scale, but that doesn’t matter at all if 10 people die acutely in their jurisdiction. Until TMORT, there was really no formal mechanism for them to get

any sort of assistance.”

The need for this kind of program has grown as mass casualty events have increased in number and complexity over time. ➡



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“Mass fatality 10 or 15 years ago was very different than it is now,” Wiersema said. “It used to be that what we were planning for was, really, catastrophes—large-scale natural disasters, like floods or earthquakes or hurricanes, where you’re generally dealing with intact remains and you’re also not complicating the thing by the fact that it’s a homicide or a crime scene. These incidents that we’re having now—you just add a whole additional dimension to the process.”

Ultimately, the TMORT plan landed under the Texas Emergency Medical Task Force (TX EMTF), a response system already in place and led by the Texas Department of State Health Services, regional advisory councils, local EMS organizations and hospital systems. The TX EMTF, developed in 2009, fulfills the need for emergency health care on short notice during man-made or natural disasters by coordinating local and regional emergency services.

While many EMTF teams use individuals from local EMS chapters, fire stations, and hospitals, TMORT draws assistance from medical examiners’ offices, academic institutions and private entities to help with scene investigations, morgue operations, victim identification and other death investigation and medicolegal operations.

The mass shooting in El Paso was the first time TMORT was officially deployed, although Wiersema traveled to San Marcos in the summer of 2018 to test TMORT as part of a multi-agency response to an apartment fire that killed five people.

TMORT works through the arrangement of pre-rostered, vetted and trained professionals who have signed an agreement with the state. When a mass casualty event occurs, TMORT will reach out to the leadership of an unaffected jurisdiction (with pre-approved professionals) to request assistance, Wiersema said.

Often, smaller jurisdictions who may need assistance don’t

know exactly what to ask for, so Wiersema’s team created a rapid assessment guide, which includes a series of questions to help TMORT identify the type of professionals needed. TMORT will pull together a team based on the severity of the event and the rapid assessment results.

In El Paso, TMORT supported the local medical examiner’s office with autopsy exams and evidence management. Phillips, the HCIFS assistant medical examiner, and Wiersema estimate that TMORT helped reduce the time of work completion by at least one day. That’s significant—especially when families and law enforcement officials are awaiting information about the deceased.

“It went remarkably smoothly,” Phillips said. “Honestly, it’s my personal opinion that you can’t plan for these sorts of things. You can only prepare. And this was really a testament to the amount of preparation that had gone into TMORT and the

Emergency Task Force that resulted in such a smooth deployment for the first time.”

Wiersema hopes that more teams from jurisdictions throughout the state will join the program.

“There’s this misconception that we’re just picking up bodies and transporting them, but it’s so much more than that, and I think that’s part of what is so valuable about TMORT,” he said. “It’s going and doing real forensic science.”

Not only does the work bring some sense of closure to loved ones, but it also helps in the legal realm.

“Particularly with these mass shootings, a lot of cases are going to go to court,” Wiersema said. “Some of these incidents are pretty complex. Cause and manner [of death] isn’t necessarily evident on the body only, so a lot of times the scene and all the background information that a death investigator would get informs the cause and manner. There are a lot of questions that need answers and doing it right is imperative.” ●



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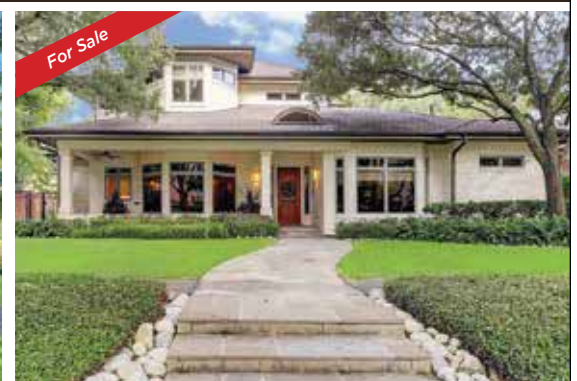


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