

Emergency Response

The sensitive return of personal effects

In the first of a series of articles, ERA member Kenyon International Emergency Services provides advice on the handling of personal effects following an air accident or incident.

Personal effects can be defined as all items that are potentially personal to an individual. That definition includes items carried in pockets, purses, briefcases and backpacks, checked and carry-on baggage and items worn by an individual.

Following an incident or accident, during recovery operations, all passenger personal effects are transferred to an on-site holding facility, under the control of investigative authorities. The airline is often responsible for obtaining the facility and then modifying the facility appropriately to handle hazardous materials. The items are segregated and examined for potential clues to the cause of the accident or incident.

Handling 'associated' and 'unassociated' items

There are two categories of personal effects recovered from an incident, being 'associated' and 'unassociated'. 'Associated effects' are either items carried on a person and recovered with that person or items with distinct features associating them to a particular person. 'Unassociated effects' are recovered at an incident site but are not



How should airlines sensitively manage the return of personal effects to a passenger's family following an incident or accident?

found on a person and have no distinct features associating them to a particular person. (An illustrated catalogue or CD of 'unassociated effects' can be a good method of liaising with the next of kin on these items, allowing families to review a list in privacy and at their convenience before making a claim.) Both 'associated' and 'unassociated' effects should be handled in the same manner and the desired method of disposition of claimed personal effects must be established from the families of

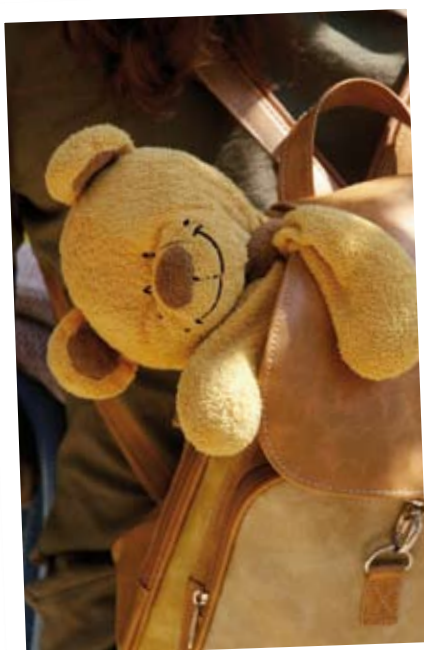
the deceased passengers. Most families choose to have personal effects returned by mail or shipping service rather than personal delivery.

If more than one person claims a specific item, each person concerned should be asked to provide substantiating evidence, such as photographs or receipts, relating to the item in question. Adjudication can then be made.

Medical risks

Any facility that processes personal effects must be able to handle hazardous materials and handlers must have procedures to respond adequately to contaminants. Sadly, personal effects might even contain fragments of human remains. Personal effects that might be contaminated by bloodborne pathogens (being micro-organisms that can cause disease) or bio-hazardous material must, legally, be cleaned.

Emergency response is never pleasant or easy for any of the parties involved. The personal effects process requires detail and sensitivity to support the needs and desires of the survivors and families of the deceased. ■



"I doubt if individuals who have not endured the catastrophic death of people they love can understand the importance of those little personal items."

– Joe Lychner, who lost his wife and two daughters on TWA Flight 800, 17 July 1996