



# FEMA

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**Lessons Learned  
Information Sharing**

## LESSON LEARNED

### Consular Notification: The International Notification and Situational Awareness Working Group

**January 11, 2016**

#### SUMMARY

FEMA Region I, in close coordination with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary of Preparedness and Response (ASPR) Region I and the Northeast Consulate General Offices of the United Kingdom and Canada, convened the International Notification and Situational Awareness Working Group (INSAWG) to improve the procedure of consular notification when foreign nationals and visitors are impacted by disasters. This notification process can help identify and provide appropriate healthcare and human services for foreign nationals and visitors. It can also assist these individuals in arranging translation services, notifying family members, and facilitating travel arrangements.



INSAWG partners include: DHHS, FEMA, Consulate General Offices, DHS, U.S. Department of State, American Red Cross, Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, MassPort, Massachusetts Public Health, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, and institutions of higher education

#### DESCRIPTION

After the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing, Consulate General Offices identified that a lack of notification processes left families and diplomatic representatives of foreign nationals unaware of the location and condition of their loved ones. To address this gap within existing notification procedures, FEMA Region I assembled critical stakeholders to create the INSAWG, including:

- Consulate General Offices of Canada, Cape Verde, Mexico and the United Kingdom
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
- U.S. Department of State
- American Red Cross
- Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency
- MassPort
- Massachusetts Public Health
- Massachusetts Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
- Institutions of higher education

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The INSAWG recommended several steps for members to take to improve notification procedures, including:

- Developing standardized plans and protocol for obtaining information on affected foreign nationals during disasters, especially for Emergency Support Functions 5 (Emergency Management), 6 (Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, and Human Services), 8 (Public Health and Medical Services), 9 (Search and Rescue), 13 (Public Safety and Security), and 15 (External Affairs); and
- Increasing awareness of the importance of, and establish procedures for, sharing information about foreign nationals who have been impacted by disasters with Consulate General Offices.

To enhance the success and range of notification planning on regional and national levels, the INSAWG recommended that members:

- Conduct outreach to government agency groups—such as law enforcement, first responders, and chief medical examiners—who are more likely to encounter injured, deceased, or detained foreign nationals and therefore may need training on consular notification procedures;
- Conduct outreach to state and local officials responsible for including consular notification procedures in state mass fatality and mass casualty plans, mass care emergency response plans, and family assistance and reunification plans;
- Conduct outreach to colleges and universities, ensuring that consular notification and assistance opportunities are included in emergency plans, policies and procedures;
- Conduct outreach to Joint Information Systems personnel—Betsy Snell and Dan McElhinney—to identify co-messaging opportunities with Consulate General Offices; and
- Implement consular notification procedures in FEMA Guidance CPG 101 and CPG 102.

### Challenges Collecting Information

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protects patients from having their information disclosed to a third party without consent. Although HIPAA does not specifically prevent consular notification, it can prevent authorities from notifying a foreign consulate against the patient's will or if the foreign national is physically unable to give consent.

In order to address these challenges, HHS released a [guide](#) for managing HIPAA requirements in emergency situations.

The INSAWG's work and mission is ongoing. Although challenges remain, INSAWG continues to better prepare emergency management professionals and communities in fulfilling consular notification requirements.

## REFERENCES

Dan McElhinney, Federal Preparedness Coordinator, Grants Management and National Preparedness Divisions Director – Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Betsy Snell, Program Analyst – Federal Emergency Management Agency.  
Phone Interview. October 29, 2014.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *HIPAA Privacy in Emergency Situations*. November 2014.

<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/special/emergency/hipaa-privacy-emergency-situations.pdf>

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