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WTC victims' kin can apply for death certificates

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Anguished families begin the process today of applying for death certificates for loved ones who perished in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.

Scores of volunteer lawyers working with state judges will help families expedite applications for death certificates — a document necessary to claim life insurance and other death benefits.

If someone is presumed dead but no body is recovered, it normally takes three years before a death certificate can be obtained.

But for victims of the Sept. 11 tragedy, the red tape is being cut so the process "is going to be reduced in most cases to a few days," said Steven Fishner, the city's criminal justice coordinator.

Lawyers will meet privately with family members in booths at the family assistance center at Pier 94 on Manhattan's West Side, officials said. The center is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Each meeting will be scheduled to last 30 to 40 minutes.

Families of victims in the city's uniformed services will have separate bereavement areas.

City officials said the volunteer legal staff would be able to help 500 to 600 families a day.

Fishner suggested next of kin arrive in alphabetical order — those with last names beginning with the letters A to G come today; H to P tomorrow and Q to Z on Friday.

But officials stressed that families can come on whatever day is best for them, or in coming days and weeks if they are not prepared to deal with the question now.

They will be asked to complete an affidavit explaining the basis for their belief that a person was at the World Trade Center at the time of the attack. They will be asked for names, addresses, relationships, dates of birth, and their last contact with the victim.

They also should bring picture identification for themselves — preferably a driver's license — and proof of their relationship to the victim. They are urged to bring recent pay stubs.

Other documentation will not be required, but Fishner suggested that families begin collecting marriage licenses, birth certificates and other documents in case they are needed.

"If you know that your husband or father or relative was working there, and you've come to terms with the idea that they're dead, and that they're not going to be recovered, then you can make the choice," Mayor Giuliani said. "And it's your choice to apply for a death certificate."

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MAYOR GIULIANI

According to the city, each relative's affidavit would be combined with one from an employer vouching for the victim's presence at the twin towers.

A judge will send an order to the city's medical examiner office. A registrar would then prepare a death certificate and send 10 certified copies by Express Mail to the next of kin.

City officials warned families to guard against giving information to strangers and solicitors who may seek to exploit the situation.

Separate arrangements for death certificates have been made for families of missing firefighters, cops and EMS workers.

Families of missing firefighters and EMS workers can contact the Fire Department counseling units at Mt. Manresa Retreat House on Staten Island at (718) 727-3844 or Fort Totten in Bayside, Queens, at (718) 352-2140).

Families of missing city police officers may contact the NYPD bereavement center at (212) 487-5829 or (212) 487-5297.

Port Authority workers' family members can contact the Port Authority family support center at (718) 751-8200.

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