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Death certificates on the way

Families of 70 victims should get paperwork tomorrow

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The first batch of death certificates for missing victims of the World Trade Center attack will be in the hands of relatives by tomorrow morning, city officials said yesterday.

Death certificates for about 70 missing people will be sent by overnight mail today, after officials cut through reams of red tape to ease the plight of heartbroken families.

"They should be received the next day," said Steven Fishner, Mayor Giuliani's criminal justice coordinator.

The city's Bureau of Vital Records, an arm of the Health Department, will send 10 copies of the certificates to each family, department spokeswoman Sandra Mullin said.

At least 1,023 families of missing victims have applied for death certificates, which are essential to obtain life insurance payments and other benefits.

Under normal circumstances, the complex legal and bureaucratic task of obtaining a death certificate for someone who is missing and presumed dead can take up to three years.

Cutting red tape

But with the devastation of the twin towers leaving little room for doubt about the victims' fate, state court and city officials agreed to dramatically streamline the process into just days.

"The court system will do whatever is needed to make this process as efficient, as quick and as uncomplicated as it can be," said David Bookstaver, a spokesman for the Office of Court Administration.

For a week, hundreds of relatives have made the trek to the city's family center at Pier 94 to begin applying for death certificates.

Volunteer lawyers help grieving relatives through a process that is, for many, a wrenching admission that their loved ones are gone for good.

The lawyers assist in the preparation of sworn affidavits in which relatives state that their loved ones were inside the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 and have not been heard from since.

Those legal documents were matched with affidavits from employers confirming that the victims worked in the twin towers.

The sheaf of documents are then shuttled to Manhattan Surrogate Court. Two judges, Renee Roth and Eve Preminger, take turns signing orders authorizing the city medical examiner's office to issue death certificates.

The bureaucratic shuffle includes one final step at the Bureau of Vital Records, where the certificates are registered and copies mailed to next of kin.



SUSAN WATTS DAILY NEWS

WITNESSES TO HISTORY The curious came to gawk at the heap of rubble where once stood the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

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