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Anguish Lingers In Wake Of Crash

Some relatives still waiting for remains

By Martin C. Evans
STAFF WRITER

Death came upon them suddenly, snatching loved ones from the blue of a November morning sky.

One month later, death still lingers among the relatives of the crash victims of American Airlines Flight 587 — most of them Dominican immigrants who shuttle between their island homeland and the city's barrios.

Many still have not been able to claim the remains of lost relatives.

Others remain unsure of their legal rights to paychecks, property or social welfare benefits associated with their lost loved ones.

Some relatives abroad are still unable to obtain visas to come to the United States so they can bury their dead.

The city's Dominican community was rocked Nov. 12, when Flight 587, bound from Kennedy Airport to Santo Domingo, crashed in the beachfront community of Belle Harbor. The crash killed 260 people on board, as well as five people on the ground.

Dominican community activists say many of their survivors are undocumented immigrants and are afraid to claim even legitimate rights for fear of being deported.

"Many people who are undocumented are scared to come forward to say my sister, my parents passed away," said Jackie Susana, a community activist in Corona. "I'd say a good 60 percent of the families that have lost loved ones are facing immigration problems, and that is why we won't hear from them."



AP File Photo

Firefighters at the scene of the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 in Belle Harbor last month.

The medical examiner's office still hasn't finished the task of identifying all the victims.

DNA identifications held up the identity of 15 of the victims until the past week. The remains of one victim still have not been positively identified.

"We're a little behind schedule," said Ellen Borakove, a spokeswoman for the medical examiner.

Many crash victims' relatives — a large number of whom speak Spanish as their first language — now face a torrent of legal issues brought on by the deaths.

With the challenges in mind, a group of lawyers offered free advice to relatives of crash victims last night at the Isabella Geriatric Center in Washington Heights.

Lawyers counseled victim's relatives on how to obtain legal representation and to avoid high-pressure sales pitches by ambulance-chaser attorneys.

Milagros Batista, a coordinator with Aliens Dominica, a social service agency, said many families are grappling with the often delicate decision of who should seek custody of children orphaned by the disaster and apply for Social Security and other survivor benefits in their name.

"People have to decide who is best to care for the children and to go through the legal process," Batista said. "That is hard for people to do when they are grieving."

But in Belle Harbor, residents shaken by the crash are doing what they can to retain a sense of normalcy.

Residents there plan to share about 2,000 toys donated by residents of Lebanon, Pa., with crash victims' relatives in Washington Heights.

"Once we started focusing on the children it's a little contagious," said Liz Sulik, president of the Chamber of Commerce of the Rockaways. "The stores are getting more crowded and more house lights are going on. There seems to be more smiles in the air."

Staff writer Merle English contributed to this story.

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