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Victims' Families Lack Voice In Effort to Coordinate Relief

By DAVID BARSTOW

For weeks officials from leading charities have been meeting privately to create a single unified database of the victims of Sept. 11 and their families, a long-sought goal promoted as an antidote to the red tape and disarray that have bogged down relief efforts. They have grappled, sometimes heatedly, with delicate questions of privacy and procedure that will ultimately influence how hundreds of millions of dollars are distributed to thousands of families.

But so far, their discussions have not included any of the people who will be most affected by the database: the victims' families. Despite requests from families to have a voice in the creation of the database that could speed up payments and perhaps solve inequities, the charities have chosen to exclude victims' representatives from the committee that has overseen the project.

Charity officials said their decision was a matter of practical expediency, and suggested that victims' families may play a role at a later date. Joshua Gotbaum, chief executive of the $340-million Sept. 11 Fund, said charities were leery enough about sharing victim information — "the family jewels" — in a central database, let alone inviting victims' families into the decision-making process. "It was a controversial judgment, I would admit," Mr. Gotbaum said, "but it was a judgment that was made solely to get speed."

But victims' relatives said that their participation could bolster the credibility of the database project, which will be publicly detailed for the first time at a news conference scheduled for today. Some family members contended that their input could help the charities avoid further mistakes, or, at the very least, blunt the growing perception among families that charities have too often been out of touch with their needs.

"Those of us in this situation look at the world with completely different lenses than anyone else," said Bonnie McEneaney, the widow of Eamon McEneaney, a Cantor Fitzgerald executive, and herself a senior executive for a financial services company. "They should have victim representation, absolutely."

The idea of the database is to create one-stop shopping for families who need help. Rather than having to apply to the 200 or more charities that have raised more than $1.5 billion in donations, families would submit requests to a single place — the database — and charities in turn would use the same database to identify people who need assistance.

Access to the data will be limited to protect confidentiality, but those who control the database will be in a position to identify gaps in aid and ensure that aid is distributed in an even-handed manner. Many policies about confidentiality, equity and access have been devised by the committee of charity officials without input from families.

Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York and the chairman of the committee working on the database, said yesterday that as the database project evolved, victims and their families would indeed have a voice in the process. "I want to make sure they get the best possible way to be heard," he said.

At a news conference today, Monsignor Sullivan is expected to announce the formation of a new nonprofit agency to oversee the database and coordinate the charity efforts. Called the 9/11 United Services Group, the agency is expected to have a 21-member board of directors and a chief executive, Robert J. Hurst, vice chairman of the Goldman Sachs Group. It will also have employees who will operate the database and assist in lining up case managers for victims.

Monsignor Sullivan, who is to be the chairman of the board, said that the board might well include one or more victim representatives, although he said he had yet to contact any victims' groups. Another possibility, he said, was the formation of a victims' advisory committee that could assist the board on policy.

"I can assure you," he said, "that the intention will be to include them as this moves along."

But for some victims and their families, the promise of future participation is of limited comfort. The reality of organizations is that major decisions are much harder to reverse after the fact, several family members contended, and not being included from the outset has deepened their mistrust of charities.

Eliot L. Spitzer, the attorney general of New York, who first suggested a database, has likened the process of working with charities to "herding cats." He said yesterday that the families' frustrations were valid and that he could not justify the charities' decision to exclude victims' representatives in the discussions about the database to date.

"Victims should be a part of those discussions," he said.

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Such is the skepticism toward charity officials that hundreds of families have already demanded not to be included in the database at all. "I've opted out," said Liz McLaughlin, another Cantor Fitzgerald widow, who has testified before Congress on how hard it is to obtain aid.

"You need people there who have firsthand experience," she said. "But the problem is that the charities, they consider it their money."

The exclusion of the families from the process contrasts with the access they have been granted by another central player in the relief effort, Kenneth R. Feinberg, the special master of the federal Victims' Compensation Fund, which is expected to grant billions of dollars to families of those killed or injured. Mr. Feinberg has met repeatedly with victims' groups to solicit their views on how the fund should operate.

The charities' database is still far from complete. So far, it consists of information on victims collected by the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross and Safe Horizon, three of the largest charities working with victims. The trouble is that none of the agencies collected data in the same way. The result is a database with about 75,000 separate records, even though there are perhaps fewer than 30,000 individual victims, including those who lost jobs.

It could take weeks to eliminate the duplication, and months more to collect similar data from hundreds of other charities.

Mr. Spitzer, the attorney general, said the data problems could have been minimized if the charities had shared information immediately. "That's exactly why this should have been done sooner," he said.

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