

FOREWORD

Our Region has been the victim of different types of disasters that have had significant, long-term consequences for the development of communities, intensifying the poverty and increasing obstacles to progress, particularly among populations with scarce economic resources.

Death does not end human suffering, especially when death is sudden, as the result of a disaster. The death of a loved one leaves an indelible mark on the survivors, and unfortunately, because of the lack of information, the families of the deceased suffer additional harm because of the inadequate way that the bodies of the dead are handled. These secondary injuries are unacceptable, particularly if they are the consequence of direct authorization or action on the part of the authorities or those responsible for humanitarian assistance.

Regrettably, we continue to be witness to the use of common graves and mass cremations for the rapid disposal of dead bodies owing to the myths and beliefs that corpses pose a high risk for epidemics. The most serious aspect is that these measures are carried out without respecting identification processes or preserving the individuality of the deceased. Not only do these actions go against the cultural and religious practices of a population, but they have social, psychological, emotional, economic, and legal repercussions regarding the legacy of the deceased, which exacerbate the damage caused by the disaster.

The State has a critical role in standardizing and guiding the tasks of handling dead bodies (recovery, identification, transfer, and final disposal), ensuring that legal norms are followed, and guaranteeing that the dignity of the deceased and their families is respected in accordance with their cultural values and religious beliefs.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is pleased to present this manual, which will be very useful for authorities and those responsible for disaster prevention and response. It is our goal to ensure that the management of massive fatalities forms part of disaster preparedness and response plans, and that it is a fundamental aspect of humanitarian assistance to survivors and rehabilitation and reconstruction programs. In this way we can preserve the memory and dignity of those who have passed before us.

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