

## ***NamUs for Critical Incidents***

### **What is a critical incident?**

Critical incidents are typically abrupt, catastrophic events that fall outside the scope of daily experiences and operations, such as accidents, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and disease outbreaks. The immediate and often overwhelming effects of critical incidents are felt across the public sector and wide spectrum of professional responders, driving a need for surge capacity and rallying of resources.

Frequently, critical incidents are confounded by confusion, chaos and miscommunication. Reporting of those whose status is unknown, often called unaccounted-for in disasters, as well as those that are accounted for and/or safe, can happen multiple times for the same person in multiple systems, increasing the complexity. Compounding these challenges is the lack of a secure, centralized, online tool for consolidating and sharing information during such events.

### **What is NamUs for Critical Incidents (NCI)?**

NamUs for Critical Incidents is a technology tool currently in development which will:

- Connect law enforcement, medicolegal and emergency management professionals, as well as victims and families during a critical incident.
- Provide real-time information about incidents.
- Help manage, account for, and identify victims of critical incidents.
- Support preparedness through a robust training and exercise site.

### **Why is NCI needed?**

Inaccurate and fluctuating victim reporting is a repeating theme in almost every disaster across the country. Compounding these challenges has always been the lack of a single secure, centralized, online tool for consolidating and sharing information during such events. NCI will fill this need by becoming an informational bridge.

### **Why is NIJ and its NamUs program best positioned to create a critical incident system?**

For over a decade, the National Institute of Justice's NamUs program has provided technology, forensic services, and investigative support to resolve missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases, while connecting law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, and other allied forensic specialists across the nation. It became apparent to NamUs leadership that the NamUs 2.0 technology, as well as the existing network of relationships and experience managing and resolving long-term missing and unidentified person cases, could be leveraged to build a new, scalable online system for similar accounting during critical incidents, but in real time.

Like the NamUs 2.0 application, NCI will have no set-up costs, and be a free resource for all U.S. agencies, including small municipalities. There will be no need for installation or new hardware. Information will be secured by professional vetting and sponsorships, usernames and passwords, and "need-to-know" tiered access. Since NCI will be instantly available nationwide, there will be no lag-time between when an incident occurs and when local responders can launch an incident.

## **Who has helped decide how NCI will work, and how have they been involved?**

Over the past several years, NamUs has consulted with recognized subject matter experts in one – or several – aspect(s) of disaster victim identification, incident response, and preparedness.

In the summer of 2019, NamUs selected a group of stakeholders to form the NamUs Critical Incident Technology Executive Committee (NCI-TEC) to guide the final development of the NCI system. The NCI-TEC consists of members from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the American Red Cross, as well as representatives in the public health sector, medical examiners/coroner offices, emergency services, and law enforcement. Earlier working groups with varied backgrounds included the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Disaster Mortuary Operations Response Team (DMORT), the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Experts in fingerprint examination, forensic odontology, forensic anthropology, and DNA were also consulted.

One of the guiding documents for NCI has been “Mass Fatality Incident Data Management: Best Practice Recommendations for the Medicolegal Authority”. This has been proposed by the Disaster Victim Identification Subcommittee and the Crime Scene/Death Investigation Scientific Area Committee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees for Forensic Science (OSAC).

“Mass Fatality Incident Data Management: Best Practice Recommendations for the Medicolegal Authority”  
[https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2020/04/07/mass\\_fatality\\_incident\\_data\\_management-best\\_practice\\_recommendations\\_for\\_the\\_medicolegal\\_authority\\_OSAC%20Proposed.pdf](https://www.nist.gov/system/files/documents/2020/04/07/mass_fatality_incident_data_management-best_practice_recommendations_for_the_medicolegal_authority_OSAC%20Proposed.pdf)

## **Who can create incidents in NCI?**

Any NCI registered professional user will be able create incidents in the system and can use NCI to manage incidents in any way that conforms to his/her established Incident Management System.

## **How quickly can an incident be set up in the system?**

An incident can be set up and launched to professional users in just a few minutes.

NCI will have an “always on” landing page that registered professionals can access at any time. When an incident occurs, professionals can immediately log in, answer a few questions regarding location and type of incident, and launch the incident for use by fellow professionals directly through the application. If the incident creator needs to launch a public-facing website, there are a few additional steps regarding configuration and approval, but that is all done at the local level. If the response team has prepared and practiced roles and responsibilities, this can all be done very quickly.

An incident can also be set up in anticipation of an event, such as an impending hurricane. Messaging to professional stakeholders, and even the public, can be circulated in advance.

## **Who will be in charge of an incident within the system?**

All incidents and their controls begin locally, and that will be the same for incidents created in NCI. These users will be vetted professionals who are accustomed to working through an incident management system, and ultimate control of the incident in NCI will reside with the incident owner(s).

### **What happens when an incident starts in one city, but then crosses jurisdictions, or even states?**

NCI is designed so that incidents can be merged and the system will allow for multiple professional users to join incidents as jurisdictional boundaries expand. NCI will also identify duplicate incidents the moment they are entered, so incident creators can collaborate and determine if they need to be combined. Each state, territory, and the District of Columbia will have an NCI state cabinet made up of at least 4, but no more than 10, members. Each state cabinet will then select one state cabinet member to serve on an NCI regional cabinet. These regional cabinets will be organized in the same geographical pattern as FEMA regions. This will pave the way for cross-jurisdictional collaboration and capitalize on already established mutual aid agreements.

### **What is meant by tiered access?**

Some professional users will have full access and the ability to see all case information, while others will be limited to basic information such as aggregate numbers, time, and place. Incident creators, owners, and administrators will be able to issue and adjust access levels for incident participants.

### **The current NamUs system is unique because it allows the public to enter missing person cases, and to view publicly-viewable information in published cases entered by other users.**

#### **Will NCI work the same way?**

The public will be able to enter cases if the incident creators and incident owners authorize input from the public, and enable the public incident-specific website. This will be decided incident-by-incident. Whenever appropriate, the public will be able to enter information on persons who are unaccounted-for or safe, but unlike NamUs, public users will only be able to see information they provided on the cases they enter. After entering their report, public users will be able to update the report status (e.g. change unaccounted-for to safe), but they will not be able to see any professional updates to their case.

### **How will people be able to access this system during an incident?**

When a public webpage is launched for an incident, there will be a simple and intuitive roadmap that guides the user through the steps of case entry. Public users will first need to enter their personal contact information, and then they can immediately begin entering information on the unaccounted-for or safe person.

In some instances, case entry and investigations will remain private, and only professional users will have access. Professional users will access the system through the professional landing page. They can request to join current incidents or be granted automatic access according to their incident-related credentials. Known, unregistered professionals can also be granted access to a specific incident by a “fast-pass” invitation issued by local incident administrators.

### **Will family members from other countries be able to access this system if, for instance, their loved one is in the U.S. when the incident occurs?**

Yes. Any individual with internet access to the public portal can use the system.

Translation to and from Spanish will be built-in to the NCI application, and foreign consul notification will be an opt-in feature. Foreign consular officers will also be able to enter safe and unaccounted-for persons into the system. As public users, foreign consular officers can act as liaisons for families and

under certain circumstances, they can establish themselves as the point of contact. This will be especially beneficial when language is a barrier, or when access to technology is limited.

### **Who will be able to access the information in the NCI application?**

Vetted professional users will be assigned specific access levels, per user, per incident. Individual access levels and permissions will be assigned by the incident owners on a local level.

### **What about information privacy?**

No unauthorized users will be able to see personal identifying information or medical details. At the present time there are no plans to document injured or ill patients in NCI. There will be opportunity for health care providers to include total numbers, and when granted appropriate permissions, they will be able to access information regarding unaccounted-for persons.

### **What role will NCI play with traditional Family Assistance Centers?**

A traditional family assistance center (FAC) often becomes the heart of a critical incident and includes multiple services and functions that are not directly associated with victim reporting and identification. It takes time for an FAC to get set up, and in many cases, families are asked to travel to one of these centers to be interviewed by victim information section personnel. NCI can serve as an immediate first-step virtual FAC by allowing investigators to collect vital information almost instantly through the public web portal. Families and/or friends will be able to enter information about a person who is unaccounted-for or safe, and they can enter this information from their mobile devices, a laptop, or desktop.

### **How can NCI help with victim identification?**

For disaster victim identification, no matter how large or small the incident, medical examiners and coroners can leverage the same state-of-the-art technology imbedded in NamUs. NCI will provide secure access to incident victim records that can be uploaded from anywhere. Potential duplicates will be flagged by the system for review and consolidation, as appropriate. Proposed matches will be generated to facilitate links between categories. Case management, advanced searching, and matching tools within the application will expedite case associations and resolutions. Intuitive and instant uploading of fingerprints, photos, dental charts and x-rays will allow medicolegal authorities to rapidly and confidently confirm or exclude possible identifications online.

### **Can NCI be used for pandemics like COVID-19?**

Yes, NCI can be used for pandemics. There are several aspects to victim accounting in a fatality surge such as COVID-19. One is victim identification; another is rapidly keeping an up-to-date census of fatalities. Since NCI can be used by any number of professionals across all jurisdictional boundaries, some of the issues seen in reporting total death counts may be solved.

### **What impact will NCI have in disaster situations when 911/311 call centers can sometimes be overwhelmed?**

If the NCI incident owners/creators have enabled the incident-specific public website, effective, immediate messaging can direct the public to the self-service case entry form to relieve some of the surge normally experienced by 911 and 311 call centers. Professionals in traditional emergency call centers can also take and enter information, even if the NCI incident remains private.

### **How will NCI interact with Non-Government Agencies (NGO's), like the Red Cross?**

The exact scope and specific user access have not yet been established, but the American Red Cross has a representative on NCI-TEC, and NGO's at all levels are being considered stakeholders.

### **How do professional users and their agencies get access to this system?**

Law enforcement and medicolegal professionals are encouraged to register for the existing NamUs 2.0 system now at [www.NamUs.gov](http://www.NamUs.gov). Current vetted and sponsored NamUs 2.0 professional users will not need to undergo additional vetting for NCI and they can use their same username and password for NCI. Registrations for allied emergency professionals are not yet open but requests for updates can be made by signing up on [www.namuserinfo.org/nci](http://www.namuserinfo.org/nci). Agency access will be through individual users, and agencies will be given the opportunity to upload and credential all of their agency users in bulk.

### **What about training and practice?**

A 24-7 training and practice site will be available for agencies to create scenarios, assign appropriate access levels, and work through incidents of varied size and complexity. Agencies can apply and adapt NCI for whatever events are likely for their particular area. Using NCI as part of regular exercises will enhance user confidence and help shape response to future events. This will also help agencies meet grant requirements and ease the mind of constituents by demonstrating that responders prepared for incidents and potential problems.

### **When will NCI be available to professionals and the public?**

A beta testing site for designated professional stakeholders of NCI will be launched in calendar year 2020, and a full launch will follow, pending outcomes of the beta testing. Work is currently underway to fill state and regional NCI cabinet members, and these seated members will be among the designated stakeholders for beta testing.