Mobile morgue gives coroners ability to respond to disasters

By MELISSA MOORE
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The unlabeled beige office trailer with the detached concrete stairway sits on the parking lot at the city lot on Chippewa Street, where city-parish vehicles are fueled and repaired.

Nothing about the utterly nondescript portable building suggests that, inside, pathologists probe the dead for evidence to explain how they died and, in many cases, perhaps to help identify their killers.

Coroner Louis Cataldie said he started having autopsies done in the trailer, called a “mobile disaster unit,” in July after the Earl K. Long Medical Center morgue closed for several weeks to remove asbestos.

The Coroner’s Office then began testing the unit, which is designed to be taken to disaster sites where mass casualties or contamination require on-scene forensic work.

It could be used for a plane crash, a nuclear, hazardous material or radiation accident or a terrorist attack in which biological agents are used. In some of those cases, bodies could not be taken to a hospital because it would be dangerous for others to be exposed to them, Cataldie said.

Don Moreau, operations chief for the Coroner’s Office, said the disaster unit had to be modified for its new use and that work on the trailer started about three months ago.

A cooler designed to hold three bodies was installed, and Coroner’s Office employees installed a seamless floor in the autopsy room so contaminated body fluids cannot leak out.

Cataldie said he has spent about $18,000 for the trailer and all the equipment.

Moreau said the initial bid just for the equipment was $37,000, but he has managed to cut costs by getting military surplus and used medical equipment.

It would take two hours to get the unit on the road to a disaster scene, Moreau said.

Cataldie said as far as he knows, the mobile morgue is the only one of its kind in the country. He said he hopes to recoup the money he has spent with a grant, perhaps from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Steve Williams, the Birmingham, Ala., branch manager for Acton Mobile Industries, which sold Cataldie the trailer, said his company hopes to use the modifications made on it to equip other agencies with similar needs.

“It’s almost like a prototype,” he said.

Williams said Acton and the Coroner’s Office are refining the design as the Coroner’s Office uses it.

Cataldie said the building has already needed some ventilation adjustments.

Moreau said no evidence or bodies stay in the trailer.

Cataldie said bodies are being brought directly from the crime scenes to the trailer, pathologists do the autopsies almost immediately and then the bodies are released to funeral homes.

“We’re just trying to get more efficient,” he said.

Earl K. Long spokesman Don Buchanan said the morgue was closed for several weeks for asbestos removal, but reopened two weeks ago.

“Autopsies are being done there,” he said.

Cataldie said he was not aware that the Earl K. Long morgue had reopened.

He said that he will continue doing autopsies in the trailer for the time being, but may return to Earl K. Long because the hospital morgue has more advanced equipment.

*See MORGUE, Page 2B*
The Coroner's Office mobile disaster unit, at the city-parish lot Wednesday on Chippewa Street, is unmarked and low-key.

**Morgue**

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Autopsies on badly decomposed bodies, which have in the past been done at some funeral homes or even in the garage at the State Police Crime Lab, will now be done at the trailer, he said.

Cataldie said he hopes to solicit bids in October for the Coroner's Office permanent morgue and new office space near Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center.