Officials look for clues to identify washed-up caskets

Officials working to figure out who's inside all the caskets washed out of graves during last month's floods are using a process of elimination that might go as deep as cracking open the burial containers so the LSU Face Laboratory can perform forensic tests on the remains.

Mementos tucked away in coffins by loved ones also could end up as important clues. Arbie Goings, a cemetery recovery consultant hired by the Department of Health, has found jewelry, a man's cap with a sports team name on it and even a six-pack of beer while working past disasters.

"We found a bag of marbles in a casket one time," said Goings, a longtime funeral director who has been investigating wiped-out grave sites since Hurricane Katrina. "Lo and behold, we interviewed a family, and the grandchildren loved to play marbles with their grandmother and they put a bag of marbles in there."

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also flooded. "Some kind of way we're gonna have to piece it all together," he said. "Think about how traumatic that is to know that your mother or dad is out there, just ...'it just sounds so horrible.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is providing reinterment assistance for Louisiana cemeteries. Landry said he expects to be reimbursed 90 percent of the costs of reburial.

The LSU Faces Laboratory, a service relied upon by law enforcement for various jobs including bone analysis and 3-D clay facial reconstruction, is also standing by in case it is needed to identify remains.

"I think what's probably made this such a tough situation is because many of us personally have flooded. So many of the family members have flooded and they have so much on their plates," said Goings, who lives in Denham Springs.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Nearly two months after record rains upended at least 58 cemeteries statewide, with damage to at least 522 graves, according to Health Department data, workers are still trying to put the dead back in the ground. The health department data was current as of Sept. 16, said spokesman Bob Johannessen, but he said officials expect the number has increased and will issue new figures next week.

First, graves have to be identified. So far, officials are still investigating hints outside the caskets before having to pry them open, Goings said. Exterior signs could involve plastic tubes with names in them, affixed to a casket; metal identifying tags; or records from funeral homes that list the names of people buried in particular caskets. Officials are asking families to dig up funeral photos: Maybe a group picture shows a loved one's coffin in the background?

The state Health Department has been keeping track of how many of the disrupted caskets have been identified, but Johannessen said Friday he doesn't yet have a statewide estimate of how much work is left to be done. For a snapshot, 65 percent of the 239 damaged graves at the hardest-hit graveyard, Plainview Cemetery in Livingston Parish, have been identified, he said.

Leaders at Roberts United Methodist Church, which owns Plainview Cemetery, have been holding meetings for the congregation to spread the word that families should start identifying disrupted caskets, Goings said.

Earlier this week, several uprooted caskets waited in limbo, clustered under tarps at Denham Springs Memorial Cemetery, a public burial ground. Other graves there, on Thursday, had vault lids jutting from the ground like tilted-open trap doors. A total of 19 caskets were dislodged at that cemetery.

That city's mayor, Gerard Landry, said the dilemma of reconciling washed-up caskets with names is compounded by another problem: Some of the places where records were kept, like the vault at City Hall, also flooded.

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"My home flooded. I lost my vehicle. ... We took 16 inches of water. Not as bad as some but enough to make a mess."

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