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### **Improvement Cited in Crash Response**

By LEON DROUIN KEITH  
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LOS ANGELES (AP) — The head of a group that lends support to survivors of air crashes has offered praise for the government's handling of the Alaska Airlines disaster.

The National Transportation Safety Board "is doing a great job of keeping families informed," said Gail Dunham, president of the Washington, D.C.-based National Air Disaster Alliance.

Scores of volunteers from the American Red Cross and airlines are offering support to families of victims of Flight 261, which crashed Jan. 31 in the Pacific Ocean northwest of Los Angeles.

So far, bodies of only four of the 88 people on board the MD-83 airliner have been recovered.

"Our first priority is to recover as many of the remains as possible," said NTSB spokeswoman Lauren Peduzzi.

About 260 Alaska Airlines and affiliated Horizon Air employees have been assigned to assist individual families, who are regularly briefed by officials leading the recovery effort.

Relatives in other recent U.S. air disasters have not had such support, advocates say.

Dunham, for instance, still longs for the silver pocket knife of her ex-husband, Capt. Harold Green, who was killed in the 1991 crash of United Airlines Flight 585 in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Recovery efforts failed to produce the knife, and in the wake of the crash, "the only way you learned anything was on TV," she said.

A friend of Dunham's clings tightly to a button from a military uniform — the only thing connected to her son that was left after the ValuJet crash in the Everglades in 1996.

Relatives of those killed in Alaska Airlines Flight 261 seem to be faring better, with access to the crash site and an improved flow of information.

"Each time we learn lessons, we take those lessons and move forward," said Peduzzi of the NTSB. "We are very attuned to the needs and concerns of families."

In part, Dunham credits the shift due to the federal Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996, which spells out how the NTSB, airlines and agencies such as the Red Cross should respond to crashes.

Before the act — which Dunham's organization lobbied for — it often took two or three days before airlines even told families a loved one had died. Access to crash areas also was sometimes restricted, even for families whose religions required them to visit the site.

**Getting families information quickly is critical, agreed Heidi Snow, who founded AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services after her fiance died in the crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996.**

**"It's really important to know every effort is being made," Snow said, "even if there's no information."**

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EDITOR'S NOTE: AirCRAFT Casualty Emotional Support Services' Web site is [www.accesshelp.org](http://www.accesshelp.org).