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Families still question distribution of Sandy Hook funds

By Dirk Perrefort

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Families of those slain at [Sandy Hook Elementary School](#) believe the \$7.7 million distribution announced Thursday is a step in the right direction, but concerns remain about how the process will move forward.

Some of the family members of those who died on Dec. 14 questioned why the Newtown-[Sandy Hook Foundation](#) would announce that money would be distributed before a formula was put into place to guide the distribution of the money.

Family members, who wished to remain anonymous, said the foundation made the same mistake earlier this month when announcing that \$4 million would go to the families of those most affected.

The foundation expanded on that decision Wednesday when it announced a total of \$7.7 million, of the \$11 million donations the organization received, would be distributed directly to the 40 families.

That includes the families of the 26 who died, the 12 students who fled the classrooms where the shooting occurred, and two educators who were injured, but what percentage of the money each of those victim groups will receive has yet to be decided.

"The whole point of us asking the foundation to hold off on the \$4 million distribution was because they didn't know how much would go to the different victim groups," one family member said Thursday. "They've made the same mistake twice."

Foundation board member Dr. [Charles Herrick](#) said Thursday that according to the organization's bylaws, the board can't make decisions about how the money will be distributed.

A three-member distribution committee announced Thursday that is chaired by former federal judge [Alan Nevas](#) will be charged with making those decisions, Herrick said, after receiving input from the community.

Herrick added that Nevas, an attorney with the [Levett Rockwood](#) law firm in Westport, was appointed chairman of the committee after repeated calls from family members saying that an independent arbitrator was needed.

Families can voice their concerns publicly during two hearings planned for next month, or meet privately with Nevas or nationally known victims' fund compensation expert [Ken Feinberg](#).

Feinberg, who the families met with earlier this month at their request, has agreed to assist the committee in its decision making.

Family members of those slain, however, said they would prefer to have Feinberg serve as a single administrator to the fund without a committee process.

Herrick said the bylaws call for a committee process so that community input can be gathered as part of the decision making.

"Community input was considered to be a critical component that other communities impacted by mass shootings didn't have available to them," he said.

The foundation represents the largest pool of donations out of the more than \$20 million that's poured into the community. Of that money, nearly \$3 million has already been distributed.

Some of the largest distributions to families has come from the My [Sandy Hook Family Fund](#), which has raised nearly \$1.5 million and was created solely to benefit the 26 families of those killed.

The family fund has distributed more than \$50,000 to each of the 26 families and is expected to make another distribution in the near future, an official for the fund said Thursday

The Hartford Courant

Newtown Victims To Now Divide \$7.7 Million

By DAVE ALTIMARI

April 26, 2013

As a federal judge, Alan Nevas was used to dealing with everything from long-term oversight of state agencies to sentencing drug dealers.

But, he said Thursday, nothing compares to the Dec. 14 massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown.

The former judge will lead a panel that will decide how to distribute \$7.7 million to those most directly affected by the shooting, the Newtown-Sandy Hook Community Foundation Inc. announced Thursday.

The foundation said that 70 percent of its \$11.35 million fund will be divided among 40 families — including 26 that lost loved ones in the shootings, the 12 children who escaped the two classrooms where the shootings happened and the two teachers who were shot. Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 first graders and six adults in the rampage.

The foundation had previously stated it would distribute \$4 million to the families.

"Once I was asked, there was no way I could say no," said Nevas, of counsel at Levett Rockwood in Westport. "The facts are so horrendous, there is nothing comparable in my lifetime — and so if you can do anything to help than you do it."

Also Thursday, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Bridgeport said that the families of the 26 who died at Sandy Hook recently received money from donations made to Newtown's St. Rose of Lima Catholic Church. Sources said each family received \$10,000.

In an e-mail to the victims sent Wednesday night, the foundation said the rest of the money, more than \$3.6 million, will go toward the short and long-term needs of the community and will not include direct payments to any families.

The foundation and the United Way, which has helped collect donations since the shootings, have come under criticism from some of the victims' families for moving too slowly to distribute the money.

Many members of the families of the 26, including 20 first graders and six adults, who were killed and Gov. Dannel P. Malloy say they believe that the bulk of the money should go to the victims' families and be divided up by an independent arbitrator, preferably Ken Feinberg, the

arbitrator who handled the major fund established after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and who has been brought in to distribute the fund set up for victims of the Boston Marathon bombing.

"The governor has long believed that bringing on a third party administration charged with providing timely assistance to the families was the right course of action. Today's announcement is a positive step forward," said Andrew Doba, Malloy's spokesman.

"We urge the foundation to act as quickly as possible, and to make sure the voices of the families continue to be heard throughout this process."

The foundation has been adamant that the fund was never intended as a victims' compensation fund but rather as one for the entire community.

But after meeting with the families and hearing some of their concerns, foundation members changed course and brought in Nevas to be the chairman of a distribution committee charged with deciding how to split up the money that is going to the families.

Besides Nevas, that committee includes Dr. John Woodall, a psychiatrist formerly with Harvard Medical School, and Joseph Smialowski, a 32-year town resident and executive at Citigroup. Woodall's expertise is in post traumatic stress disorder.

Feinberg, while not directly involved, will be advising the committee. It has taken his suggestion and will hold two public hearings on May 7 and May 8 to allow residents to give their opinions on how the \$7.7 million should be divided.

Nevas said Feinberg is expected to attend the public hearings. The committee expects to make a final decision by May 31. If victims' families do not want to speak publicly with the three-member committee a private meeting will be arranged, Nevas said.

"Obviously we will hear from the families of the victim's first but if people want to come and be heard we will listen to everyone," Nevas said.

Sources stressed the first public hearings will not be about what to do with the remaining \$3.5 million in the fund. A second distribution committee will be formed in the coming weeks to oversee that money. Public hearings will also be held before any decisions are made about that money.

Nevas said he doesn't know how the foundation arrived at the \$7.7 million figure.

"I didn't participate in the discussions on how much money was going to be distributed to the families," Nevas said. "Our charge is to distribute the money that is available. We have decided that this is not something that will drag on. We want to make decisions quickly so the families can try and move on."

The money from St. Rose was donations from all over the country following the massacre. Diocese spokesman Brian Wallace said overall about \$325,000 was donated and that Monsignor Robert Weiss formed a committee of parishioners to decide how to distribute the money.

Sources said each family got \$10,000, some money also was given to the families of the 12 surviving children as well as to fund for first responders and the Sandy Hook PTA.

In a letter to family members Weiss, who is also on the foundation board, said the money came from collections at parishes, fundraisers all over the country and simple things like "dress down" days at Catholic schools.

"No one can ever remove the pain or trauma caused by the events of December 14, 2012," Weiss wrote. "It has been a privilege to witness the strength that you have demonstrated in the midst of so much tragedy. I can only pray for the peace that you need each day you wake up to the reality of your suffering."