

# Basic Death Notification Procedures

These are some of the cardinal principles of death notification. Some of the points overlap, and all will be refined by the notifier's experience and judgment.

## "In Person"

Always make death notification in person -- not by telephone.

It is very important to provide the survivor with a human presence or "presence of compassion" during an extremely stressful time. Notifiers who are present can help if the survivor has a dangerous shock reaction -- which is not at all uncommon -- and they can help the survivor move through this most difficult moment.

Arrange notification in person even if the survivor lives far away.

Contact a medical examiner or law enforcement department in the survivor's home area to deliver the notification in person.

Never take death information over the police radio.

Get the information over the telephone, or it might leak out to family through the media or private parties listening to police radio. If radio dispatchers start to give information over the radio, stop them and call in.

## "In Time" -- and with certainty

Provide notification as soon as possible -- but be absolutely sure, first, that there is positive identification of the victim. Notify next of kin and others who live in the same household, including roommates and unmarried partners.

Too many survivors are devastated by learning of the death of a loved one from the media. Mistaken death notifications also have caused enormous trauma.

Before the notification, move quickly to gather information.

Be sure of the victim's identity. Determine the deceased person's next of kin and gather critical information -- obtain as much detail as possible about the circumstances of the death, about health considerations concerning the survivors to be notified, and whether other people are likely to be present at the notification.

## **“In Pairs”**

Always try to have two people present to make the notification.

Ideally, the persons would be a law enforcement officer, in uniform, and the medical examiner or other civilian such as a chaplain, victim service counselor, family doctor, clergy person, or close friend. A female/male team often is advantageous.

It is important to have two notifiers. Survivors may experience severe emotional or physical reactions. (Some even strike out at notifiers.) There may be several survivors present. Notifiers can also support one another before and after the notification.

Take separate vehicles if possible.

The team never knows what they will encounter at the location. One might need to take a survivor in shock to a hospital while the other remains with others. (Shock is a medical emergency.) One notifier may be able to stay longer to help contact other family or friends for support. Having two vehicles gives notifiers maximum flexibility.

Plan the notification procedure.

Before they arrive, the notifier team should decide who will speak, what will be said, how much can be said.

## **“In Plain Language”**

Notifiers should clearly identify themselves, present their credentials and ask to come in.

Do not make the notification at the doorstep. Ask to move inside, and get the survivor seated in the privacy of the home. Be sure you are speaking to the right person. You may offer to tell children separately if that is desired by adult survivors.

Relate the message directly and in plain language.

Survivors usually are served best by telling them directly what happened. The presence of the team already has alerted them of a problem.

Inform the survivor of the death, speaking slowly and carefully giving any details that are available. Then, calmly answer any questions the survivor may have.

Begin by saying, "I have some very bad news to tell you," or a similar statement. This gives the survivor an important moment to prepare for the shock.

Then, avoid vague expressions such as "Sally was lost" or "passed away." Examples of plain language include: "Your daughter was in a car crash and she was killed." "Your husband was shot today and he died." "Your father had a heart attack at his work place and he died."

Call the victim by name – rather than "the body."

Patiently answer any questions about the cause of death, the location of the deceased's body, how the deceased's body will be released and transported to a funeral home, and whether an autopsy will be performed. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't be afraid to say so. Offer to get back to the survivor when more information is available, and be sure to follow through.

There are few consoling words that survivors find helpful – but it is always appropriate to say, "I am sorry this happened."

## **"With Compassion"**

Remember: Your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to death notification.

Accept the survivor's emotions and your own. It is better to let a tear fall than to appear cold and unfeeling. Never try to "talk survivors out of their grief" or offer false hope. Be careful not to impose your own religious beliefs.

Many survivors have reported later that statements like these were *not* helpful to them: "It was God's will," "She led a full life," and "I understand what you are going through" (unless the notifier indeed had a similar experience.)

Plan to take time to provide information, support, and direction. Never simply notify and leave.

Do not take a victim's personal items with you at the time of notification.

Survivors often need time, even days, before accepting the victim's belongings. Eventually, survivors will want all items, however. (A victim's belongings should **never** be delivered in a trash bag.) Tell survivors how to recover items if they are in the custody of law enforcement officials.