

## DEATH NOTIFICATIONS



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## Course Objectives

- ▣ Identify types of death calls made
- ▣ Learn basic Death Notification procedures
- ▣ Identify appropriate /inappropriate language
- ▣ Recognize various reactions to Death Notifications
- ▣ Gain basic understanding of legal issues
- ▣ Gain basic understanding of grief and grief responses
- ▣ Identify ways to put a support system in place
- ▣ Without messing up the investigation process

## Types of Death Notifications

- ▣ Natural Causes
- ▣ Fatal Accident/Crash
- ▣ Industrial Accidents
- ▣ Homicide
- ▣ Suicide
- ▣ Officer Involved Shootings
- ▣ Infant/Child Death
- ▣ Line of Duty Death



## Be Prepared!

- ▣ Get the facts – assume nothing!
  - Identify those involved
  - Gather all available information before making the notice
    - Who, where, when, what
    - Be absolutely sure you have positive ID of victim(s)
  - Gather Next of Kin information
    - Location
    - Relationship
    - Special Circumstances (physical, mental, etc.)
- ▣ Proceed as quickly as practical
  - Take Law Enforcement with you if possible



## Death Notification Procedures

- ▣ Make notice in person if at all possible!
- ▣ Identify self and those with you
- ▣ Confirm relationship of deceased to NoK
- ▣ Try to have everyone seated
- ▣ Be specific and use clear language
  - Call the deceased by name - not “the body”
  - Use words like “dead” or “killed”
  - Do not use words like “passed on” or “they’re gone”
- ▣ Be compassionate – Be patient
  - Allow people to act out their emotions
  - Don’t judge the persons emotions or lack thereof

## Death Notification Procedures (cont)

- ▣ Answer questions truthfully
  - Never speculate – stick to the facts
  - Do **NOT** share information regarding on-going investigations
  - Provide pertinent/appropriate information
    - Explain Coroner/ME process if appropriate
    - Determine funeral home preference if possible
  - Advise NoK how to get further information
- ▣ Attempt to assemble support network for family
  - Take appropriate time – don’t just notify and leave
- ▣ Never return victims belongings in a trash bag!
- ▣ **Never make a promise you don’t intend to follow through with!**

## Use Appropriate Language

- ☐ Things NOT TO SAY:
  - "I know how you feel"
  - "Time heals all wounds"
  - "You'll get over this"
  - "You just have to go on with your life"
  - "He never knew what hit him"
  - "You can always find someone else worse off than yourself"
  - "It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all"
  - "You can always have more children"
  - "He/she lived a good long life"



## Appropriate Language (cont)

- ☐ Avoid religious clichés
  - "It must have been his/her time"
  - "Someday you'll understand why"
  - "This is actually a blessing"
  - "God must have needed him/her more than you"
  - "God never gives us more than we can handle"
  - "Only the good die young"
  - "This was God's will"
- ☐ Examples of WHAT TO SAY:
  - "I am so sorry this happened"
  - "This is an incredible loss for you"



## Reactions of Family

- ☐ Physical
  - Be alert to possible medical issues
- ☐ Emotional
  - Be prepared for anything and everything
- ☐ Mental
  - Try to redirect any guilt or blame
- ☐ Spiritual
  - "Why did God let this happen?"
  - "Where was God when this happened?"
  - THIS IS NOT THE TIME FOR ATTEMPTING CONVERSION EXPERIENCES OR JUDGING SURVIVORS



## Legal Issues

- ☐ Check and double check facts prior to notification
- ☐ Avoid notifications by phone if at all possible
- ☐ Don't leave survivors alone
- ☐ Have officer, another chaplain go with you
- ☐ Avoid media contact
- ☐ If applicable, provide information regarding the procedures of Coroner/ME



## Reactions to Death Notices

- ☐ Shock
- ☐ Disbelief of what you tell them
- ☐ Physical illness
- ☐ Extreme emotional response
- ☐ Numbness
- ☐ Quiet



## Support System for Survivors

- ☐ Family members
- ☐ Neighbors
- ☐ Clergy
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Co-workers



## Workplace Death Notification

- ▣ Ask to speak to manager/supervisor
  - Ask to meet with the survivor in a private setting
  - You don't have to give specific details regarding the purpose of your visit
- ▣ Follow same basic procedures for other notices
- ▣ Offer to transport survivor to location of their choice
- ▣ Let survivor determine what he/she wants to tell to their boss
- ▣ Do not leave survivor alone

## Media & Investigation Issues

- ▣ Do not share any information with the media unless directed by police personnel
- ▣ Media should not be involved in the Death Notification process
- ▣ Remember - investigation of a crime is separate from the Death Notification process
- ▣ Do not relate any crime investigation information you may have to survivors or to media



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## Role Play #1

- ▣ Chaplain Smith receives a call from Dispatch to meet Sgt Taylor at the scene of a fatal car crash. He and Sgt Taylor will make a death notification to the wife of the man killed in the accident. The only information available about the family is the man's age (35), and his wife's name (Sue) and address (1.5 mile from scene). The Coroner has asked you to gather identity information as well as funeral home choice.

## Role Play #2

- ▣ Chaplain Jones is called to meet Officer King at the police station. An elderly woman who lives alone has been found dead by a neighbor. Chaplain Jones and Officer King will go together to make a death notification to the woman's daughter. The daughter is very emotional and filled with guilt about not checking on her mother. [NOTE: This is the first Death Notice for Officer King.]

## Role Play #3

- ▣ Chaplain Mark has been called to the scene of an officer involved shooting following a robbery attempt. The suspect was shot and killed by an officer after the suspect began firing his weapon at the officer. Capt. Clark was not on scene at the time of the shooting, but will accompany Chaplain Mark for the notification. The media has already got wind of the incident and is at the home of the suspect when they arrive. The suspect has a large family who are extremely agitated already and do not believe their family member would rob a store much less pull a gun on police.