

Death Notifications – Notifying Our Own About Their Own

By John Cooley

In the academy, officers are taught how to make death notifications, learning how to be prepared to provide support and information in a compassionate manner. It is accepted that there will be times when officers will have to notify a family that a spouse, child, or parent has died, often as the result of a traffic collision or violent crime. Academy training is adequate and officers are sufficiently prepared to do the inevitable. Then an incident occurs and it is a matter of policy or procedure as to who will respond and how the notification will be made. The dispatcher or the watch commander makes the assignment and the task is completed in a professional manner. The family is grateful for the officers' compassionate and caring assistance. The assigned officers then return to available status.

Then a call comes into the watch commander's office and another agency or an employee's family member or a family friend informs the watch commander that a spouse or child or parent of one of their agency members has died. The circumstances may be tragic or horrific. The watch commander is asked to make the death notification.

Is the agency ready? The watch commander can't merely check the status screen and determine which unit is available to make the notification. So, who is going to do it? How is it going to be done? Where will it be conducted? What support services are available? Are the people involved sufficiently trained and prepared to do this most difficult task for one of their own?

Is there a need for a plan or protocol? Yes! A comprehensive plan that establishes management's objectives, explains in clear terms what shall be done and what may be done, defines the roles of those involved and, lists the support services and resources available. An agency's plan should include:

1. **Death notification.** This is the most critical area in helping mitigate rather than escalate the trauma of the event. A predetermined group of supervisors and employees should be identified as the most likely to be responsible for fulfilling this task. This list should be updated regularly so that there are no lapses in preparedness. If the agency employee being notified is the first of the family to be notified then the agency may be involved in assisting with making the notifications to other family members (spouses, children, siblings, grandparents). This is another responsibility best dealt with through preplanning. Agencies must also keep in mind that other employees who are close friends of the deceased/or related agency member may also need to be notified. Another need for preplanning.
2. **Transportation.** When an employee is notified about the death of a family member transportation should be provided to wherever they need to go. Their personal vehicle will need to be taken to a location of their choice also.

Preplanning will provide the watch commander with some options to insure this happens without significantly disrupting deployment.

3. **Initial support.** If the employee is taken home or to a hospital there will likely be a need to provide support. The plan should include what type of support should be provided, who would be best to provide it, what should be expected of them, and how long should it be provided.
4. **Available resources and services.** Knowing what resources and services are available and how to contact them is essential. Department psychologists, Employee Assistance Programs, chaplains, peer support, and other human resource services and resources can provide valuable support to the employee involved, their family, and other members of the agency.

Planning prevents poor performance and reduces the potential for emotional injury to those involved. But having a plan on file is merely an administrative exercise if management is not committed to ensuring that it is periodically reviewed and connected to a training system that insures that those responsible for implementation are prepared.

Is there a need for special training? Yes! Training that takes the basic principles (in person, in time, in pairs, in plain language, and with compassion) to a more comprehensive and personal meaning. Training insures preparation. Training promotes a sense of caring and support. Training allows those responsible for making the notification and providing initial support to be prepared to accept this responsibility and perform it in a knowledgeable and caring manner. Training that deals with these issues and occurs on a regular basis instills a sense of trust in the organization and demonstrates that management cares about the people and their families.

When this notification is made the person making the notification will not be able to excuse themselves and leave. They will need to be totally involved and do more than expected for the general public to support and assist the involved employee. Their responsibilities will significantly increase and the outcome will impact not only the involved employee but also the surviving family and every member of the agency. Other agency members will likely be brought in to assist. They need to know what will be expected of them and what their responsibilities will be and how to accomplish them.

The notification needs to be made by the best person, in the best place, in the best manner, and as part of the best plan. Should anyone expect less?

To support the training there needs to be a plan or protocol. Yes, an actual written plan that identifies not only who, where, and how but what support services are available, i.e. chaplains and peer support members; and what resources may be useful, i.e. Employee Assistance Program or agency psychologist.

Since police agencies operate 24 hours a day seven days a week any plan needs to take into consideration the time of day. This will influence who may make the notification and what support services are readily available.

Where are the best places on any shift to have an expectation of privacy? The involved officer probably just received the dreaded radio call, "Come to the station, see the watch commander, Code -2." Their anxiety level will naturally be high. Telling them to go to the chief's office, with no explanation, won't make them feel any better. Having a supervisor take them into an empty office may resemble the typical beginning of a personnel investigation. Those initial moments until the best place can be reached will be awkward. Maybe the best place, if conditions are right, and to do it in a timely manner is the parking lot. Think about it first and include some options in the plan. Then work the plan.

Who are the best people within the department on every shift to make the notifications? It should not automatically be the highest-ranking person on duty. Training and preparation may prepare the highest-ranking person to be the primary notifications person but planning and analysis may identify that the person in the ranking position may not be, for a variety of reasons, in the best position or the best suited for this special task. An order of preference should be prepared. These people should be trained. The involved officer's partner or immediate supervisor or best friend may not be the best person to make the initial notification either, regardless of their rank. Notifications should be made in pairs and one of those two people should be adequately trained.

The notification process becomes more complicated if the deceased is within the jurisdiction of the agency and the cause of death is the result of a traffic collision or violent crime scene. Managers and supervisors may be involved in coordinating the agency's response and resulting investigation and someone else will need to make the notification and provide the initial support. Planning helps provide workable options. Also, the involved officer may demand to go to the scene or become involved in the investigation. What will the response be?

These notifications, telling an officer that their infant child just died of SIDS or that their teenage child was killed in a traffic collision or that their spouse had a heart attack, are for one of the agencies' own. *It is now personal.* Only the best will do. No one is going to be able to make the notification and leave. The officer being notified is not just a log entry. They are in the workplace and will be in the workplace on a daily basis. They will remember how they were notified, supported, and treated.

It sounds so simple. It's done in the field and done well. Why would it be a problem in the agency? One reason is that people want to make the notification less painful so bad that they violate the basic process in which they were trained. They feel so uncomfortable that they won't stay with the involved officer, but want to think they are doing a favor by leaving them alone. This is why there is a need for specialized training, to take the basic concepts to a higher level and adapt them to the law enforcement community. For some

agencies it has been done before and no one complained. Of course, no one critiqued the situation afterwards with those who were involved.

The complaints by the notified officer are seldom made to management. They come out during grief counseling or peer support sessions, or to personal confidants. The agency doesn't necessarily learn how the notified officer truly felt and what they remember. The emotions some officers have expressed are about a seemingly impersonal process -- being notified in the watch commanders office with others standing around, phones ringing, and no sense of privacy. A 60-mile drive home *alone* is remembered as one of misery and dread. Or a self-righteous supervisor telling the officer not to worry about completing the bereavement leave forms, that he/she will complete them and, oh by the way, if they need anything to be sure to call.

Then there are the feelings about returning to work after their bereavement leave and no one acknowledges their loss and how they are treated like they just returned from a vacation no one wants to hear about. These are the feelings remembered but not mentioned to the agency managers. These are the feelings that do not have to be experienced. These are the unwelcome remembrances that can be reduced through training and planning because every plan should include what to do when the officer returns to work.

This topic may appear to be unorthodox to many since the likelihood of this happening may be considered remote by many agencies. But law enforcement agencies train for the unexpected and the remotely possible routinely. It comes down to recognizing what is important to the agency and its members. Approximately two million people die every year in the United States. The likelihood of an agency having to notify one of their own about their own may not be as remote as many may assume. The purpose of this article is not to review how death notifications should be made and support services provided. There is ample information available and can be acquired from organizations such as Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS) and the International Conference of Police Chaplains (ICPC). Agency managers need to look within and determine what they can do to be better prepared to support their agency members. If these types of notifications have been done, were they done well and in a comprehensive manner? If it hasn't been done yet, is the agency prepared? Now is the time to discuss it, prepare for it, plan for it, and train for it. No chief or sheriff or watch commander should have an officer "knocking on his or her door" and be thinking, "How should this be done?"

About the author: John Cooley is a retired Los Angeles Police Department sergeant. He was the department's funeral coordinator for the last nine years of his thirty-year career. He has managed 24 line of duty funerals and over 60 police funerals, including 18 suicides. He assisted over 150 employees who experienced the loss of a family member, primarily spouses, children, and parents. He is a certified bereavement facilitator and a member of the CPOA Line Of Duty Death Committee. The author can be reached at www.policefunerals.com or (805) 522-4861.