

Planning for the Unthinkable Police Funerals

Planning for a police funeral, the unthinkable, is difficult for many agencies. It can be especially difficult for those who have not experienced the tragic loss of an officer in the line of duty. It is difficult to plan for the loss of an officer who is on active duty and dies as the result of sickness or accident. It is difficult to plan for the death of a retiree. It is difficult to plan a police funeral for an active officer who has committed suicide. a topic many do not want to talk about, much less plan for. But like many law enforcement contingency plans, it is one protocol that should be on file but hopefully will never be implemented.

Planning is an essential element of preparedness. Planning for the death of an officer is not a morbid exercise in being prepared for the unknown or the unlikely. It is being prepared for the unexpected. An average of two million people die every year in the United States and over 150 officers die in the line-of-duty every year. The chance of an agency experiencing the death of an officer may be remote, based on past experience, but it is not to be unexpected. Planning will benefit the agency, its members, and the family of the deceased.

Planning should include two major components: 1) a *written*, comprehensive protocol applicable to the agency, its members and the community it serves; 2) the assignment of a specific person, adequately-trained and prepared, to be the agency's funeral coordinator.

A line-of-duty funeral involves myriad activities, events, tasks, services, and ceremonies. Typically, it involves over a hundred topics to be reviewed, evaluated, applied, managed, and coordinated, *all on a strict time line*. There will be little opportunity for in-depth discussions, revisions and preparations. A select strategic planning team may find themselves responsible for a staff of a hundred people on the day of the services, with events at several locations, and attendance in the thousands.

An agency preparing a protocol should approach it from the perspective of planning for a line- of- duty death. A line-of-duty death funeral protocol should include all essential information about notifications, services, ceremonies, support resources, customs and traditions. Any police funeral

for an active duty officer or retiree will include the majority of issues articulated in the line-of-duty protocol. The primary exceptions are usually the inclusion of a rider-less horse and the helicopter missing man fly over. These two ceremonial customs are traditionally reserved for line-of-duty funerals. All other honors, the rifle salute, flag fold and taps, are traditional honors for all police funerals. It is easier to review a comprehensive protocol and down size the planning process for a police funeral of an active officer or retiree rather than trying to expand the process.

A protocol should be the result of extensive research and the collective experience of the reviewing entity. The rationale behind the recommendations should be well-reasoned and unanimously accepted by the committee members tasked with approving the protocol. It is not the purpose of the protocol to detail the reasoning behind the recommendations because to do so would make the protocol unmanageable and useless. A typical police line-of-duty funeral protocol should contain at least ten chapters. The primary issues should include:

1. **Notifications.** Death notifications are a multi-faceted responsibility. It means much more than notifying the surviving spouse of the deceased officer. It includes the deceased officer's spouse or domestic partner, all children, and the extended family of the deceased. It includes assisting the surviving spouse/domestic partner in notifying all of his/her relatives. It means assisting any family member in notifying anyone with whom they want help. It means notifying all agency employees, on and off-duty.
2. **Incident Management.** A strategic planning team needs to be formulated immediately. Police agencies are prepared to implement a response to an unusual occurrence by implementing the Incident Command System. A modified version of this system will meet the needs for funeral management and coordination.
3. **Support and Assistance Resources and Services.** The services of chaplains, mental health professionals, and peer support personnel will be required. Having them identified before the crisis occurs, as potential assets, will significantly reduce the time required incorporating them into the response plan. A mutual aid agreement with surrounding agencies will allow for patrol and other vital services coverage during the period of time when the agency will

likely be experiencing collective shock and grief and while attending the services.

4. **Funeral Planning.** The actual list of considerations for a funeral can easily go over one hundred items. Identifying them and prioritizing them takes considerable effort but will significantly reduce the potential for omissions and unforeseen problems. The objective is to make informed decisions. Funeral planning includes myriad lists and checklists for every conceivable detail associated with such issues as: family needs, visitation, vigil service, church service, interment ceremonies, motorcade, and parking.
5. **Benefits.** Surviving families are typically entitled to financial benefits from a variety of sources. These sources should be identified and included in the protocol. All financial matters concerning the surviving family should be considered private information and should never be made public knowledge. Continuing health care is another critical benefit for the surviving family.
6. **Memorials.** Memorials can include everything from flower memorials at the services to the annual National Law Enforcement Memorial ceremonies. A list of memorial related issues could be identified and summarized with sufficient information to insure the surviving family and involved agency are prepared.
7. **Specialized Units.** Planners for line-of-duty funerals for members of specialized units need to be cognizant of a special fraternal relationship that exists between these officers. Specialized units like SWAT, Motors, Bomb Squads, and K-9 are a brotherhood unto their own. They often belong to national organizations, such as the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA), and there will be expectations to have special ceremonies included in the funeral plans. Preplanning can insure that appropriate static displays, special presentations, and readings are included in the order of services.
8. **Support groups.** The inclusion of support groups for surviving families and agency members and their families from the local to the national level will be critical to any protocol.

9. Grief and Bereavement. A summary of fundamental grief and bereavement issues associated with the line-of-duty death of an officer can provide valuable information to those tasked with planning, managing, and coordinating the funeral. Grief and its manifestations can easily overwhelm anyone, especially those expected to continue to do their jobs as patrol officers, detectives, and dispatchers.
10. Training. Since a protocol is a document that provides a plan and a response to an identified occurrence it should also include a training outline for those tasked with managing and coordinating the funeral services. Agencies that plan for floods, earthquakes and riots can plan for a line-of-duty funeral. Table-top exercises and site visits are legitimate training exercises and should be part of the response plans. Seminars are also available on a variety of police funeral related topics.

The designated agency funeral coordinator should be as competent as the incident's lead investigator. Bringing in a professional private consultant to assist the agency's funeral management team should be considered. When one of an agency's own is the victim, dealing with such a tragedy becomes extremely personal. It is hard for the management team to remain objective and organized when they are grieving.

Agencies should prepare for the unexpected even though it is the unthinkable. A comprehensive protocol and designated police funeral coordinator will reduce the potential for an agency to be overwhelmed and for errors or omissions to occur. At a police funeral there is only one chance to do it right. The surviving family and members of the involved agency and everyone in attendance will remember the funeral for the rest of their lives. There is no reason for these memories to be tarnished because of poor planning and coordination.

About the author: John Cooley is a retired sergeant and 30-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department. The last nine years of his career he served as the Department's Funeral Coordinator. He is a Certified Bereavement Facilitator and developed his expertise in coordinating law enforcement funerals through managing 18 line-of-duty funerals for LAPD, plus 3 for other California agencies (Simi Valley, Pomona, and Palos Verdes Estates) in addition to over 60 LAPD funerals for active officers. He is also experienced in managing police funerals for active and retired personnel of

all ranks and special circumstances or needs (suicides, AIDS, females, multiple deaths, specialized units – SWAT, Motors, etc.) He can be reached through his web site at www.policefunerals.com or by calling (805) 522-4861.

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Summary:

Planning for a police funeral is an unthinkable thought for many agencies. It is a topic many do not want to talk about, much less plan for. Like most law enforcement contingency plans, it is a protocol that should be on file but hopefully will not be used. Planning for the death of an officer is not a morbid exercise in being prepared for the unknown or the unlikely. It is being prepared for the unexpected.

A line-of-duty funeral involves myriad of activities, events, tasks, services, and ceremonies. It typically involves over a hundred topics to be reviewed, evaluated, applied, managed, and coordinated, all on a strict time line. The funeral coordinator should be as competent as the incident's lead investigator. When planning a police funeral there is only one chance to do it right. A comprehensive protocol and a competent coordinator will insure that this is done.