

Police Funerals – Police Suicide

Is your agency ready?

By John Cooley

An active sworn member of a law enforcement agency dies. Not a line-of-duty death, just dies from one of those things ordinary people die from. The family, co-workers, and agency expect a traditional police funeral, an opportunity to show a final tribute to a loving spouse, fellow officer, and law enforcement professional. A special recognition reserved for sworn police officers nation-wide.

A traditional police funeral typically consists of uniformed personnel attending the funeral services, a eulogy given by the chief, a motorcade of marked vehicles with red and blue lights flashing, and interment ceremonies that include an honor guard. The honor guard performs a rifle salute, plays taps, folds the national flag and presents it to the Chief, who presents it to the surviving family.

At the conclusion, everyone feels good about the unique services and ceremonies. Respectful, dignified, honorable are terms being used. A tribute to one of their own that served with honor and excellence. No one should expect less.

Many agencies have never experienced the death of an active sworn member. The assumption is that if it happens, the agency will do the right thing. There is no need for agency leaders to meet and discuss this potential occurrence. There is no need for a policy. Who would complain about a traditional police funeral being provided for an active sworn member of any agency?

Now a death occurs and the cause is not ordinary, it's suicide. Will there be a traditional police funeral? This question has been asked by many agencies and will be asked by many more. Suicide often has a stigma attached to it. Peoples' moral and religious beliefs influence how it is perceived. Old timers and new hires view it from different perspectives. People often speak in hushed tones and make comments about weakness, character flaws, and eternal damnation. Some disapprove because the act embarrassed the agency and tarnished the badge.

Then there are others who perceive it as a human act, committed by humans, because they are human. For them, the purpose of the funeral is to honor how someone lived and served, not how they died.

The time to decide on how an agency will respond to this type of incident is *before it happens*. The responses from members of an agency's management team, department chaplains, city managers, and governing bodies may be varied and in opposition to each other. Some will support a full traditional police funeral with honors. Others will advocate that there be no outward show of a traditional police funeral and definitely no honors. Others may suggest compromises such as:

- Chief will not attend services or interment ceremony.
- Agency members can attend on duty, but not in uniform.
- No honor guard.
- Honor guard will attend but no honors ceremony.
- No honors but the family will be presented a pre-folded national flag.

Some argue that a traditional police funeral promotes an acceptance of suicide, that those contemplating it may convince themselves it is an acceptable act because their family will witness services and ceremonies incorporating traditional activities showing honor and respect. If there is no police funeral or honor guard ceremony, then maybe someone contemplating suicide might reconsider because their family will not have the opportunity to participate in a service of honor and pride.

Funeral services and ceremonies are always at the request of or concurrence of the next of kin. But what if the family asks for a traditional police funeral? How will the agency respond?

The decision on how an agency responds to the suicide of a sworn member should be made before it happens, because once it happens, the time restraints and other demands placed on the agency can be overwhelming. Peoples' expectations, for or against, will create and place substantial pressure on the agency. Will there be or will there not be a traditional police funeral? The answer is not universal or unanimous. Agency leaders need to discuss and prepare for it now, and put the plan into writing. Now.

Related websites: National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation

www.psf.org

National Strategy for Suicide Prevention

www.mentalhealth.org/suicideprevention

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 30- year career. He has managed 24 line- of- duty funerals and over 60 services for active officers that included 18 suicides. He can be reached through his web site www.policefunerals.com or by calling (805) 522-4861.