

Death Notification Procedure

I. Introduction

- A. This is the most difficult responsibility of a chaplain.
- B. The chaplain must learn to deliver a death message in a manner that will effectively communicate what has happened and still be an act of positive public relations.

II. The Person Making The Death Notification – Duties

A. Confirm The Message

- 1. Don't allow yourself to get involved in a cruel prank.
- 2. Don't believe every phone call you receive, call back to confirm.

B. Obtain as Much Information as Possible

- 1. **What** happened?
- 2. **When** did it happen?
- 3. **Where** did it happen?
- 4. **How** did it happen? (Beware of giving out too much detail)
- 5. Disregard **Why** it happened.
- 6. Gather information about **Survivors**.
 - a. Who is the next of kin?
 - b. How many are in the family?
 - c. What are the ages of the children and/or elderly?
 - d. Consider special health conditions of survivors.

III. Go In Pairs At least one person should be in a Class A or Class B uniform

- A. Even with the chaplain, a uniformed firefighter is necessary to lend credibility.
- B. Decide who will take the lead.
- C. Identify yourselves.

IV. VERIFY The Identity and Manifest Compassion.

- A. **Make sure you have the correct address, family and deceased.**
- B. You are there to assist a “**victim of circumstance,**” not to act judgmental.
- C. As a professional in the act of assisting people, you must:
 - 1. **Empathize** and provide necessary resources and support to assist them in responding to your information.

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2. **Assist them in ‘handling’ their responsibilities** resulting from your visit.
- D. You are representing the Chaplain’s Office of the _____ Fire Department.
- E. As in other situations where you are working with victims, you have the advantage of **being in control** of the situation.
1. Remember, you **do not bear the responsibility** for the reason of the information you bring.
 2. You must be able to maintain sufficient objectivity to **resist emotional involvement**, which is a constant threat.
- V. Deliver the message In Person and In Private if possible**
- A. Try to get **INSIDE** the residence and close the door, then gather the family together.
- B. **NEVER notify by phone**
- C. If a death notification is to be delivered in **another city**, get aid from their fire department.
- VI. Give the News in Small Doses.**
- A. Relate the message straight out, use direct terms, avoid euphemisms, deal with reality, and don’t beat around the bush.
- B. Let the information “Soak In”.
- C. Remember, you are there to **assist the victim(s)** of this circumstance to meet and work through the initial trauma.
- VII. Beware of Reactions:**
- A. Shock – fainting
- B. Disbelief – denial
- C. Hysterical – Uncontrolled crying
- D. Anger – fighting
- E. Blaming you – kill the messenger of bad news
- F. Don’t take any reaction personally.
- VIII. Find Assistance for the Mourners**
- A. Offer to call their Pastor, Priest, Rabbi, Family, or close friends.

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- B. Do Not Leave Them Alone. Don't drop the bomb and run away; stay and help as long as your services are desired.
- C. Assess the need to call for medical help (Doctor may need to give tranquilizer or sedative).

IX. Provide Needed Information to the Family

- A. Explain the role of the Medical Examiner and leave the contact information for the Medical Examiner.
- B. Explain the reasons for the Firefighter Autopsy.
- C. Explain about funeral home selection and notification.
- D. Assure them that they do not need to make a lot of decisions right now, beyond their immediate needs.
- E. Leave your business cards with them.

X. What About Organ Donations?

- A. Questions regarding organ donations should be considered if the fallen firefighter is medically capable per the attending physician to be a donor and only if the Medical Examiner agrees.

All other information concerning this subject should be discussed by a representative of the Organ Donor Association or hospital with the family.