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**“And I thought of a girlfriend or a young wife
And a state trooper knocking in the middle of the night
To say your baby died in a wreck on the highway”**

– Bruce Springsteen, “Wreck on the Highway”

Rebecca Kanable

Death Notification: The Toughest Job in Law Enforcement

A 30-year-old man was killed in a traffic collision on his way home from work. It’s 2:00 a.m. and you have been assigned to tell the man’s wife this bad news. How do you prepare yourself? What will you say? How will you act? Does your agency have a death notification policy and procedure? Have you had refresher training to help you do your best? Are you prepared to deliver news which will forever change someone’s life?

Making a death notification is something a police officer may never be asked to do, or it might be something a commanding officer only needs to do if an officer dies in the line of duty. While officers do not know – if and when – in their career they will be assigned to make a death notification, they should not be caught unprepared. An hour spent on the subject in the police academy is not enough to teach an officer how to tell someone that their loved

one has died – a moment that’s typically forever imprinted in a survivor’s memory.

Maxine Lynch, President of the California Peer Support Association (CPSA), suggests police officers who could be assigned to deliver a death notification should train at least once a year – even if the training is a 20 minute refresher during roll call.

At its annual conference, CPSA, providing support for officers, dispatchers, employees and others, asks a survivor to talk about his experience receiving a death notification. Steve Bessant spoke at last year’s CPSA conference to show his gratitude for the support he was given when his son, Officer Daniel Bessant, 25, died as a result of injuries sustained during a traffic stop.

While it may have been departmental procedure for the Oceanside (California) Police Department to have Chief Frank McCoy and Capt. Reggie Grigsby inform a law enforcement family that their officer has died, Steve Bessant says they had to do something no one would want to do. Like the actions of the officers and firefighters who tried to help his son in the field, he says the commanders’ actions were heroic.

“When I think back to that night, I’m overwhelmed with how much love and compassion was shown to us,” he says. “Their emotion wasn’t held back. They stepped up and fully engaged with us, and I’m really grateful they had what it takes to carry us through that part.”

Bad News Delivered Badly

Unfortunately, death notifications aren’t always done right.

Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.) National President Jennifer Thacker remembers when she was told that her husband Brandon Thacker, age 27, a Kentucky Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control Investigator, was shot and killed April 16, 1998. She was notified at the doorstep. While that didn’t cause a problem for Thacker, she says doorstep notifications are discouraged because of the physical reactions people can have to this kind of trauma. Instead, officers are to ask if they may come in and sit down.

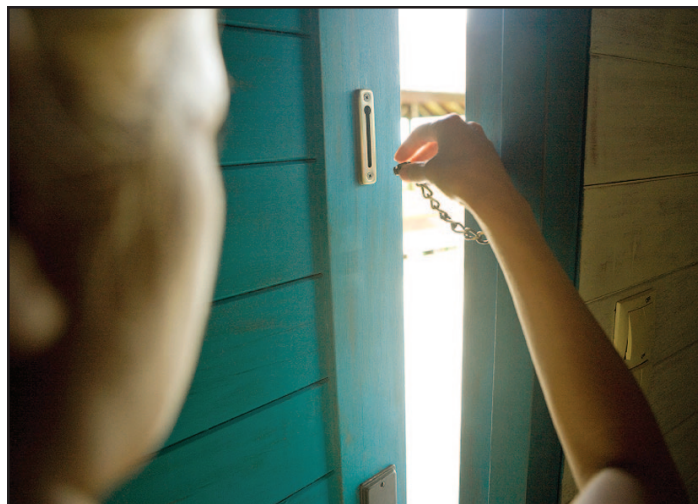
Other mistakes officers have made during death notifications are listed in *Support Services to Surviving Families of Line-of-Duty Death: A Public Safety Agency Handbook* by C.O.P.S. Executive Director Suzanne Sawyer:

- A police widow from Texas heard the report of a police shootout on her car radio. The reporter informed her that her husband had been killed.

C.O.P.S. emphasizes the name of the deceased officer must never be released to the media before immediate survivors living in the area are notified.

- A police wife from New Jersey traveled two hours in a cruiser with two officers to the hospital where her husband had been taken after being shot. During the entire trip, she was told her husband would be fine. When she arrived at the hospital, she was told he had died at the scene of the shooting. She resented being given a false sense of hope.

C.O.P.S. advises that notification should be done as soon as possible and in person and never by just one person. (If immediate survivors are from out of town, C.O.P.S. says request personal death notification from the public safety agency in that area. Logistical arrangements should enable simultaneous telephone contact with the fallen officer’s department.) C.O.P.S. suggests a public safety chaplain, psychologist, agency head or representative, or another public safety survivor accompany the informing officer. However, C.O.P.S. emphasizes if these people are not readily accessible,



Doorstep notifications are discouraged because of the physical reactions which may occur.

notification should not be held up. If the opportunity to get the family to the hospital presents itself, officers shouldn’t wait for the appropriate delegation to gather.

The “Grief Walk”

When mistakes are made, they can cause additional trauma. The notification is an event that starts a survivor’s grief walk, Thacker describes. “The grief walk can be one which helps you grow into a resilient person or it can be damaging,” she says.

As Thacker trains officers how to deliver death notifications, officers talk to her about the mistakes they made. She tells them, “Chances are, as long as you were compassionate when you delivered the death notification, you did fine. You’re not going to be perfect.”

She emphasizes what is important is giving officers the tools to do their best.

C.O.P.S. offers a three day training program, called “The Traumas of Law Enforcement.” On the first day, death notification procedures are discussed in-depth. For example, C.O.P.S. strongly advises against having the surviving parent tell the children that their mom or dad has died.

“What we find is that children, especially between the ages of eight and 12, then have a strained relationship with the surviving parent,” she says, describing this as kill the messenger syndrome.

Instead, C.O.P.S. advises that an officer should notify the children that their mom or dad has died, and the surviving parent can embrace and comfort the child.

Little details can have long lasting effects.

To help officers make some of their personal desires and wishes known in the event something should happen to them, C.O.P.S. recommends they write down notes like who they want (or don’t want) to be part of the death notification team. “Your Personal/Financial Diary – An Aid for Organizing Your Affairs for Your Family” is available from C.O.P.S. at www.nationalcops.org under Agency Information and Printed Material.

Notification Basics

C.O.P.S. uses *In Person, In Time – Procedures for Death Notification*, a booklet published by the Iowa Attorney General’s Office, as a teaching tool on death notification. That document was one of the resources used by Nancy Davis, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, to put together a death notification training video when she was Chief of Counseling Services in the FBI’s Employee

Assistance Unit.

Denny Hayes, Director of Human Services and chaplain for the Onondaga County (New York) Sheriff's Office, narrates the video and describes death notification as a compassionate science. "You can be both 'official' and very compassionate," says Hayes, who also serves as chaplain to the Syracuse (New York) Police Department and the FBI.

When a law enforcement agency initially makes contact with a survivor seems to make a big difference in the way people process things initially and later on, he says. Like the golden hour in emergency medicine, Hayes says there's a golden hour in death notification. Timing is crucial.

Hayes also emphasizes the importance of having a two person death notification team. When agencies assign only one officer to make a death notification, he says that puts a lot on the one officer and one officer is more likely to forget something and feel less confident giving the notification than when two are involved.

When two people are assigned to deliver a death notification, Hayes says they should be clear on the roles each will take. One should be the spokesperson, identify team members, make sure the notification is to the correct person and verbally give the death notification. The other can provide support to children and others present.

Other notification basics are provided in the video:

- Deliver the notification directly and clearly. For example: "We're sorry to have to tell you this. There was a traffic crash this morning and, as a result, your husband, John, has died."
- Use the word "died," so there is no misunderstanding.
- Don't use platitudes or try to minimize their loss with statements like "it was God's will" or "be strong for your children."

Understanding Survivors'

Reactions to Traumatic Loss

After giving the notification, Davis emphasizes it's important for officers to be silent. "Let the loved ones process the information in whatever way it happens for them," she says. People may yell and scream. They may become emotionally disturbed. Though it's rare, they may become violent.

"The loss and trauma is so intense that a loved one responds with intense emotions which might be suppressed in other social situations," Davis says. The loss of a child would almost always cause raw responses, she says, while other losses depend on how much the person who died defines the life of the loved one.

Younger police officers, not having served in the military or lost a loved one, may not be able to understand what it's like to be told a loved one has died.

While most experiences which evoke intense emotions need to be experienced to be really understood, Davis says, "that doesn't mean we can't have empathy for someone experiencing something we haven't experienced."

"It's important that, even if officers don't understand the depth of the loss or emotion, that they realize that, sometime in their future, they will probably be getting the same type of notification. Officers should give a death notification in the same manner which they would want to receive it."

To Protect and Serve – and Be Compassionate

Hayes describes, "Death notifications are painful. They can get inside your soul."

That is especially true, he says, when children are involved or the death is the result of a horrific act.

Being compassionate means suffering with the survivors, Hayes



One basic rule is to deliver the notification directly and clearly, so that there is no misunderstanding.

says. "A lot of the time, we don't want to suffer with somebody," he says. "The feelings involved with death can stir up other cases and memories."

Whether someone is wearing a collar or a badge, he says, "There's nothing I can do to make you immune from the sorrow following a tragedy. When you go and tell someone that their child is dead or their parents are dead, no matter who you are, it's a painful encounter."

The Notification Process

While the emotions are difficult, the notification process is not.

Davis put together a wallet-sized card with the key points to remember when making a death notification: Use a team approach. At the door, the spokesperson identifies team members; asks for the identity of the person at the door to ensure the notification is being made to the correct person; and asks to enter the residence.

Once inside, the spokesperson asks if anyone else is home, especially children; says, "Call them if you want them here"; and asks family members to sit down.

When the family members are seated, the spokesperson delivers the notification directly and clearly; tells them that their family member has died, using the person's name; is silent and does not try to fix their pain; is prepared for a variety of responses; and listens and provides information.

The team provides ongoing support by not leaving family members alone; offering to call friends/family/coworkers/clergy; asking children/adolescents who they want for support; offering transportation for family members; and remaining with the family until support arrives.

When support arrives, fill them in on important details and write down important information.

If the notification is made in a place other than the survivor's home, give notification in a private place and make sure the survivor has support before leaving.

If survivors want to view the body, prepare them. Describe for them how the body will look.

When the situation appears stable, ask if there are questions; offer condolences; and leave business cards with phone numbers.

Team members should take time to debrief; discuss how each person is doing; and review the process and suggest improvements.

If possible, visit the survivors the next day. If not, call and ask how they are doing.

Never Routine, Always Disturbing

Hayes has delivered death notifications hundreds of times. Thinking about that, he asks, then answers his own question: “Does it become common? No. Just when you think you’ve seen it all, you realize you haven’t.”

For example, he told a woman that her 30-year-old husband had died in a traffic collision. Fifteen years prior, Hayes had told the now deceased husband that his father had killed his mother and then committed suicide. Hayes realizes he’s now doing second generation death notifications. “I think death notifications become easier in the process, but they are all disturbing,” he says.

Davis recommends that the officer who views the body of the person or people who have died not give the notification. She says that can create the potential for the death to become more personalized and traumatizing to the officer or to become a flashback.

She also has found that officers who give death notifications or view bodies of children who are the same age as their children and/or who look like their own have a much higher risk of becoming traumatized.

“If a department understands this, then an officer could trade off on giving a notification when the victim is similar to a family member,” she says.

Chaplains and Others Answering the Call

Dan Nolta, the international liaison for the International Conference of Police Chaplains, tells chaplains, if they want to help police officers, they should do death notifications. Under the sponsorship of Tacoma-Pierce County Chaplaincy, Nolta founded the Police and Fire Chaplain’s Training Academy in partnership with the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission. Death notifications are something chaplains also must train to do. At the academy, two hours are devoted to death notifications and students are given scenarios to practice what they’ve learned.

One of the most important steps for chaplains is knowing department policies and procedures.

To help ensure the information is relayed accurately, Nolta gives chaplains a death notification information sheet. He also advises rehearsing the name of the person who has died and the name of the person to whom the notification is being made. “You wouldn’t want to go up to the door and ask for the person who is deceased,” he says.

Other points he makes are to speak kindly, but loud enough to be easily heard and to let the survivors suggest their own support system – “Who would you like to have with you right now?”

And, Nolta reminds chaplains to pray before they begin the difficult task of delivering bad news which will forever change a person’s life.


In one sense, it’s a terrible thing to do, he says, but, as the title of his book *Compassion – The Painful Privilege* points out, it’s also a painful privilege to help people at one of the worst moments of their lives.

Debriefing

After speaking with the survivors, Davis says officers should talk with other officers about their death notifications and be aware when the notification has been particularly difficult.

“They also need to understand that they often become officers to help and protect,” she says. “Giving death notifications is one of their job requirements which doesn’t seem to fall within these boundaries. That is another reason they are difficult. Officers

generally want to help the innocent or the citizen who is law-abiding and a good person. Giving death notifications is a task which can make the officer feel that they are the agent of the trauma – even though they had nothing to do with the loss.

“Giving the notification in the manner which has been found to be most helpful won’t change the fact that the death has occurred, but it can help the loved ones hearing the bad news to process and deal with the situation.” 

For more information , please contact:

California Peer Support Association
(www.californiapeersupport.org)

Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.)
(www.nationalcops.org)

Death Notification Training Video
(www.drncyndavis.com)

Police and Fire Chaplain’s Training Academy
(www.policechaplaintraining.com)

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