BASIC DEATH NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES

Race Against Social Media

- Create a social media policy regarding critical incidents. The way a family is notified can have effects for many years. One of the concerns that has been happening much too often is survivors finding out about their loved one's death through social media.
- The policy should include an appropriate timeframe after all family members are notified before any of the following actions occur:
  - Profile pictures updated to the department's badge
  - Post requests for "prayers for the officer and their family"
  - Sharing the local "breaking news" posts

Although these things are done with good intentions, these posts can be devastating to survivors who have not been officially notified by the department.

"In Person"

- Always make the notification in person – not by phone.
- Arrange personal notification even if the survivor lives far away.
- Never talk about the officer's death over the police radio. Too many people and the media have scanners.

"In Time" – and with certainty

- Provide notification as soon as possible and with certainty. Notify next of kin and others who live in the same household. Offer to notify parents, adult children and siblings.
- The speed news passes through social media makes it important to get there very quickly if the agency is to have any chance of notifying the family before they hear about it through social media or through a friend who saw the incident on social media.

"In Pairs"

- Always have 2 people present for the notification. C.O.P.S. does not recommend waiting for the highest official of the agency to be present for the notification unless they can also get there the quickest in an attempt to beat social media. C.O.P.S. recommends sending an on duty supervisor with another officer to the house.
- Take separate vehicles. One officer may need to stay at the residence with children while the adults proceed to the hospital, one may need to stay until other family members can respond to the homestead, etc.
- Notifiers should plan the notification procedure; who will say what and how much information is there to be given to the family.

“In Plain Language”

- Law enforcement families will know there is a serious problem as soon as they respond to the infamous, devastating knock at the door. But try not to make the notification on the door step. Ask to come in, gather the family, and attempt to get everyone seated.
- It is up to the surviving parent how the children are told. If children are present, ask to speak to the parent alone. Offer to notify the children, but take the direction from the surviving parent.
- Avoid vague expressions like “passed away”. Use words like “died” or “killed”. Speak slowly and carefully and inform them that “Bob responded to a domestic disturbance call today and upon his arrival at the residence, Bob was shot and died.” Do NOT drag out the details; but don’t rush through them either.
- Call the victim by name—rather than “the body”.
- Patiently answer any questions about the death, location of the body, etc. If you don’t know the answer, tell them so and get that information for them as soon as possible.

“With Compassion”

- Accept the survivors’ emotions and your own. Allow tears to be shed and never try to talk survivors out of their grief.
- Never offer false hope. If the officer has died, please tell them that.
- Do not impose your own religious beliefs and stay away from the God clichés; “It was God’s will”, etc.
- Never simply notify and leave.
- Do not take the victim’s personal items with you at the time of notification.
- If death has not yet occurred, get the family to the hospital as soon as possible in a department vehicle.
- Should the survivors want to see the officer, prepare them for what they will see in the trauma room. If they want to be with the officer as they die or shortly after death has occurred, make that happen. DENYING THE FAMILY ACCESS TO THE BODY IS NOT AN ACT OF KINDNESS.
- Stay with the family at the hospital and provide transportation back to the residence.

*These Basic Death Notification Procedures, “In Person, In Time”, were prepared by Dr. Thomas L. Bennett, State Medical Examiner, the Iowa Organization for Victim Assistance (IOVA), MADD/Polk County Chapter, and Polk County Victim Services, Crime Victim Assistance Division, Iowa Department of Justice; and Thomas J. Miller, Attorney General of Iowa. Reprinted and synopsized with permission. Complete document available at www.concernsofpolicesurvivors.org

Notations in blue ink represent issues Concerns of Police Survivors has identified as being important to law enforcement survivors relating to death notifications learned from C.O.P.S.’ 30-years of experience dealing with surviving families and how their death notifications were delivered.

SURVIVORS' RESPONSES TO DEATH NOTIFICATIONS

A person who has just received a death notification will react in one of three ways:

- Fight (they actually attack you)
- Flight (they run away or faint)
- Freeze (they show absolutely no emotion)

Always be prepared in case a survivor goes into shock and needs emergency medical treatment.

OTHER REACTIONS TO DEATH NOTIFICATIONS

Survivors will have a need:

- To express feelings.
- For calm and reassuring authority.
- For help deciding what happens next.
- To begin restoring control by making choices (e.g., calling a support person to contact the funeral home).

These needs can be met through the humane, patient and nonjudgmental approach of the notifiers. Allow survivors to express their grief freely. Take time to give them information about the death and about official procedures following the death.

HOW SHOULD THE FAMILY BE NOTIFIED IF AN INCIDENT OCCURRED, BUT THE INCIDENT IS NOT LIFE-THREATENING?

If the incident is not life-threatening, the injured officer should call their family to tell them they are go-ing to the hospital for care. The family should be advised to wait at a location where they can be met by another officer and taken to the hospital.

Should the notification to the officer's family be for a serious, possibly life-claiming incident, most law enforcement agencies will rush the family to the hospital to see their loved one. It is crucial that first-line supervisors have immediate access to emergency contact information for any officer working in the agency.

The family should be moved to a waiting room that is separate, but not isolated, from other law enforcement personnel at the hospital. It is important for the family to see the response of co-workers and hear their concerns for their partner's well-being.

Should the family find out about the incident shortly after it has occurred, do not take them to the scene of the incident. Take them to the hospital where they can see their loved one in the emergency room.

HOW SHOULD THE FAMILY BE PREPARED TO SEE THE INJURED OFFICER?

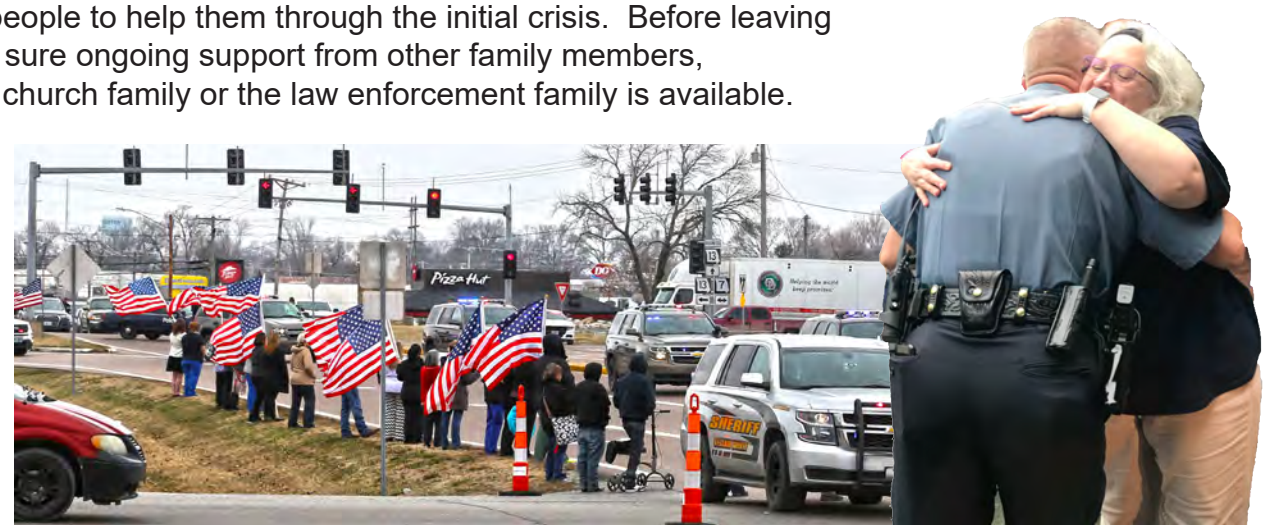
Prior to the family seeing the seriously injured officer, prepare them for what they will see in the emergency room. Be very honest: "There are tubes in his nose, in his mouth and in his chest."

The officer(s) making the notification should also be available to the family at the hospital. Agency personnel should drive the family home after surgery is complete, while the officer is resting or, unfortunately, if death occurs.The officer(s) making the notification should also be available to the family at the hospital. Agency personnel should drive the family home after surgery is complete, while the officer is resting or, unfortunately, if death occurs.

The officer(s) should leave a business card and cell phone number, and be accessible to the family through this critical time.

WHAT IF THE OFFICER DIES IN THE HOSPITAL?

If death is imminent, make arrangements for the family to visit the officer prior to his or her death and to remain with the officer after he or she dies. Being at the bedside of a loved one during and/or shortly after death can be very comforting to survivors.

ONGOING SUPPORT

Survivors need people to help them through the initial crisis. Before leaving a survivor, make sure ongoing support from other family members, extended family, church family or the law enforcement family is available.