

# RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES FOR DEATH NOTIFICATION

*The principles of death notification:*

*In person  
in time,  
in pairs,  
in plain language,  
and with compassion.*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this information is to help those who must notify survivors of the death of a family member due to a wildland fire or fire-related incident.

Death notification is acknowledged to be one of the most difficult tasks faced by anyone, because learning of the death of a loved one often is the most traumatic event in a person's life.

The moment of notification is one that most people remember very vividly for the rest of their life -- sometimes with pain and anger.

Some survivors hear the news first through the media or from a reporter calling, and then have flash-backs to that moment for years. Others tell how they were stunned to hear the person who was killed referred to as "the body" only minutes after the death. This information suggests ways to notify survivors effectively and sensitively -- including tips on what not to do or say.

Notification is an exceedingly important duty. Besides being sensitive, notifiers have to be prepared in case a survivor goes into shock and requires emergency medical treatment.

Notifiers also can provide very important information to survivors, including details about how death occurred. They can volunteer to notify others and provide other invaluable support.

***The principles described here are simple: Notification should be done in person, in time, in pairs whenever possible, in plain language, and with compassion.***

The recommended procedures were developed by people with much experience in death notification, and with help from survivors who have been through it. As one of the survivors put it, "Please remember you are assisting innocent victims of circumstance." If you have any suggestions about how to improve these guidelines, please contact the Wildland Firefighter Foundation office.

## BASIC DEATH NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES

These are some of the cardinal principles of death notification. Some of the points overlap and all will be refined by the notifier's experience and judgment.

### "IN PERSON"

Always make death notification in person -- not by telephone.

It is very important to provide the survivor with a human presence or "presence of compassion" during an extremely stressful time. Notifiers who are present can help if the survivor has a dangerous shock reaction -- which is not at all uncommon -- and they can help the survivor move through this most difficult moment.

Arrange notification in person even if the survivor lives far away.

Contact a medical examiner, law enforcement department, and local fire department in the survivor's home area to deliver the notification in person.

Never take death information over the radio.

Get the information over the telephone, or it might leak out to family through the media or private parties listening to radio. If radio dispatchers start to give information over the radio, stop them and call in.

### "IN TIME" -- AND WITH CERTAINTY

Provide notification as soon as possible -- but be absolutely sure, first, that there is positive identification of the victim. Notify next of kin and others who live in the same household, including roommates and unmarried partners.

Too many survivors are devastated by learning of the death of a loved one from the media. Mistaken death notifications also have caused enormous trauma.

Before the notification, move quickly to gather information.

Be sure of the victim's identity. Determine the deceased person's next of kin and gather critical information -- obtain as much detail as possible about the circumstances of the death, about health considerations concerning the survivors to be notified, and whether other people are likely to be present at the notification.

## "IN PAIRS"

Always try to have two people present to make the notification.

Ideally, the persons would be a Firefighter, in uniform, and the other person such as a chaplain, victim service counselor, family doctor, clergy person, or close friend. A female/male team often is advantageous.

It is important to have two notifiers. Survivors may experience severe emotional or physical reactions. (Some even strike out at notifiers.) There may be several survivors present. Notifiers can also support one another before and after the notification.

Take separate vehicles if possible.

The team never knows what they will encounter at the location. One might need to take a survivor in shock to a hospital while the other remains with others. (Shock is a medical emergency.) One notifier may be able to stay longer to help contact other family or friends for support. Having two vehicles gives notifiers maximum flexibility.

Plan the notification procedure.

Before they arrive, the notifier team should decide who will speak, what will be said, how much can be said.

## "IN PLAIN LANGUAGE"

Notifiers should clearly identify themselves, present their credentials and ask to come in.

Do not make the notification at the doorstep. Ask to move inside, and get the survivor seated in the privacy of the home. Be sure you are speaking to the right person. You may offer to tell children separately if that is desired by adult survivors.

Relate the message directly and in plain language.

Survivors usually are served best by telling them directly what happened. The presence of the team already has alerted them of a problem.

Inform the survivor of the death, speaking slowly and carefully giving any details that are available. Then, calmly answer any questions the survivor may have. Begin by saying, "I have some very bad news to tell you," or a similar statement. This gives the survivor an important moment to prepare for the shock.

Then, avoid vague expressions such as “Anne was lost” or “passed away”. Examples of plain language include: “Your daughter was in a burn over and she was killed.” “Your husband was in an engine rollover and he died.” “Your father was in an air craft crash and he died.”

Call the victim by name -- rather than "the body."

Patiently answer any questions about the cause of death, the location of the deceased's body, how the deceased's body will be released and transported to a funeral home and that an autopsy will be performed. Inform the survivor that there could be a delay before the body is released due to:

- \*Remote location of incident
- \*Coroners availability in rural communities
- \*Multiple fatalities
- \*Investigation

If you don't know the answer to a question; don't be afraid to say so. State that you will get back to the survivor when more information is available, and be sure to follow through.

There are few consoling words that survivors find helpful -- but it is always appropriate to say, “I am sorry this happened.”

“WITH COMPASSION”

Remember: Your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to death notification.

Accept the survivor's emotions and your own. It is better to let a tear fall than to appear cold and unfeeling. Never try to “talk survivors out of their grief” or offer false hope. Be careful not to impose your own religious beliefs.

Many survivors have reported later that statements like these were **not** helpful to them: “He died doing what he loved”, “She would have wanted to go this way”, “It was God's will”, “She led a full life,” and “I understand what you are going through.”

Plan to take time to provide information, support, and direction. Never simply notify and leave.

Do not take a victim's personal items with you at the time of notification.

Survivors often need time, even days, before accepting the victim's belongings. Eventually, survivors will want all items, however. (UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES should a victim's belongings be delivered in a trash bag.) If at all possible we would suggest they be placed in a “red

bag” for delivery to the family. Tell survivors how to recover items if they are in the custody of law enforcement officials.

*Give survivors helpful guidance and direction.*

Survivors bear the burden of inevitable responsibilities. You can help them begin to move through the mourning and grieving process by providing immediate direction in dealing with the death.

Offer to call a friend, family member, or religious official who will come to support the survivor -- and stay until the support person arrives. Inform the survivor that a family liaison has been contacted and will be arriving to continue assistance.

Offer to help contact others who must be notified (until a support person arrives to help with this duty).

Survivors may have a hard time remembering what is done and said, so write down for them the names of all who are contacted.

Inform the survivor of any chance to view the deceased’s body.

Be available to transport the survivor or representative for identification of the victim, if necessary. Explain the condition of the deceased’s body and any restrictions on contact that may apply if there are forensic concerns. Explain that an autopsy will be done.

Viewing the deceased’s body should be the survivor’s choice. Providing accurate information in advance will help a survivor make that decision. The condition of the body of some people killed in wildland fire incidents is horrific. If the family desires to view the body, a discussion between the family and the medical examiner may be in order. ***(Denying access to see the body is not an act of kindness.)***

## FOLLOW UP

Always leave a name and phone number with survivors.

Plan to make a follow-up contact with the survivor the next day.

If the death occurred in another county or state, leave the name and phone number of a contact person at that location. Assure the families that a liaison will be coming to help assist them, if in fact, the death notification person is not the liaison.

Most survivors are confused and some might feel abandoned after the initial notification. Many will want clarifications or may need more direction on arrangements that are necessary.

Following up can be the last step in completing a “person-centered” and sensitive death notification that is truly helpful to survivors.

The notification team should be sure they are clear on any follow-up assignments they need to carry out.

## DEATH NOTIFICATION IN THE WORK PLACE

Survivors often must be notified at their work place. Here are several tips to help apply the basic principles described above to a work place notification:

Ask to speak to the manager or supervisor, and ask if the person to be notified is available. It is not necessary to divulge any details regarding the purpose of your visit.

Ask the manager or supervisor to arrange for a private room in which to make the notification.

Follow the basic notification procedures described above: in person, in time, in pairs, in plain language, with compassion.

Allow the survivor time to react and offer your support.

Transport the survivor to his or her home, or other location, if necessary.

Let the survivor determine what he or she wishes to tell the manager or supervisor regarding the death. Offer to notify the supervisor, if that is what the survivor prefers.

## DEATH NOTIFICATION IN A HOSPITAL SETTING

Firefighters and medical examiners may be called on to do death notification at a hospital after an accident or a burn over, for example.

It is a very good idea for hospitals and other officials to determine general procedures and protocols in advance, so all parties are familiar with their duties and roles.

The principles of death notification described above all apply in the hospital setting.

Here are a few points to be sure to remember:

Find a quiet room for the notification and be sure survivors are seated. (Do not notify in a crowded hall or waiting room.)

Arrange for a doctor to be present or available shortly to answer medical questions. Doctors should be in *clean uniform*.

Inform simply and directly.

Provide assistance and guidance:

Ask if survivors wish to spend time with the body of the deceased.

Explain the procedure if identification of the deceased is necessary.  
Explain about autopsy or organ donation, if appropriate.

Volunteer to help notify others. Make a list of any calls made.

If there are media calls, refer them to the investigating officer or (if available) a victim service advocate.

Do not leave survivors alone. Be sure someone is there to accompany them.

Contact the survivor the next day.

## "DEBRIEFING" FOR DEATH NOTIFICATION

**Members of a notification team should meet as soon as possible to debrief the situation:**

Verify with the Liaison their responsibility to carry out follow-up tasks to help ease the pain and suffering of survivors.

Review the notification: what went wrong, what went right, how it could be done better in the future.

Share personal feelings and emotions of the notification team.

Death notifications are, without a doubt, stressful and difficult and sometimes very depressing.

Be frank and honest. Share your concerns with one another. Discuss any feelings team members have about the death and notification. For example, the notification experience may have triggered emotions and stress related to a notifier's own loss of a loved one.

Support one another.



## GENERAL INFORMATION ON HOW SURVIVORS RESPOND TO DEATH NOTIFICATION

### PHYSICAL SHOCK:

Persons learning of the death of a loved one may experience symptoms of shock such as tremors and a sudden decrease in blood pressure. Shock is a medical emergency -- help should be summoned.

Some of the factors that affect stress reactions are:

- \* the intensity of the event (for example, violent death vs. heart attack),
- \* the survivor's ability to understand what's happening,
- \* and the survivor's equilibrium.

Whenever possible, notifiers should be aware of any available background information about the survivors, including medical or emotional history.

### OTHER GENERAL REACTIONS TO DEATH NOTIFICATION:

Even if there is no physical shock response, death notification must be considered a crisis for the survivors. They will have a need to express feelings; a need for calm and reassuring authority; a need for help in determining what happens next; and a need to begin restoring control by making some choices -- naming a support person to call, for example, or selecting a funeral home.

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

Many survivors, regardless of background, find themselves numb and unable to take the next step. This is where the support person helps the most. Survivors need support persons to help them through the initial crisis. Before you leave a survivor, make sure such ongoing support is available.

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