

## Death Notification

Death notification is not a pleasant responsibility. Often, this task falls to law enforcement officers, victim advocates, or representatives from the medical examiner's or coroner's office. Many agencies have adopted formal policies to help their personnel with the delivery of death-related news. Even if an explicit policy does not exist, death notification procedures usually follow a four-step process (Byers, 1991; Hendricks, 1984): (1) information gathering; (2) control and direction; (3) assessment; and (4) referral.

The first step in any death notification is the information-gathering phase. The person who is to deliver the news should anticipate the types of questions the recipients may ask and determine the appropriate responses to those inquiries. The most important element here is to obtain and verify the identification of the deceased. The name of the person, gender, age, address, and any other personal identifiers are of paramount importance. Similar information about the survivor(s) is also essential. Also valuable is information on the circumstances surrounding the death, including time and place. Prior to making the actual notification, the deliverer should confirm that he or she is at the correct location and has reached the appropriate party.

Step two in the death notification process is control and direction. It is the responsibility of the notifier to define the situation for the survivor by informing him or her of the unfortunate news. The deliverer should be factual, honest, and deliberate in the choice of words. Experts advise that it is best to avoid such euphemisms as "He's gone to a better place" or "She is looking down upon us now" (Byers, 1991; Hendricks, 1984). As the impact begins to take effect upon the survivor, the third phase—the assessment stage—starts to unfold.

The primary task of the notifier during the assessment stage is to gauge how the bereaved reacts to the disturbing message. Should the recipient show signs of self-blame, or self-destructive behavior such as suicide, the deliverer will need to rechannel, guide, or prod the person out of this frame of mind. If the situation worsens, other resources (such as a clergy member, a physician, a victim advocate, another survivor, or a neighbor) may be in a better position to assist. The objective of this phase is to ensure the well-being of the survivor(s).

The last stage is called referral. Survivors will become flooded with a number of concerns. They will need immediate information about how to make funeral arrangements, how to get the body released from the medical examiner's office, what police procedures must transpire, and the like. Once the situation is under control, the notifier has completed his or her assignment and may leave the scene.

It is important to realize that leaving the scene does not mean that the situation has ended for the notifier. Emergency responders sometimes become deeply immersed in these events and have their own feelings to sort through once the formal assignment is completed (Hendricks, 1984; McCarroll et al., 1993; Walker, 1990). Many agencies will hold a debriefing session for members after a huge disaster or a major catastrophe has subsided. The intent is to relieve any stress reactions that workers may have developed during the crisis. These sessions allow workers to vent their feelings, receive information that they may have lacked during the incident, and begin readjusting to the daily routine.

## **References**

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