

Coroner and Death Notification

Death notification may be the most important message a family receives from officials. It is essential to work closely with the local Coroner to understand the roles and responsibilities in your jurisdiction. The function of Victim Advocates will be guided by the relationship with the local Coroner. However, after notification is made, it is usually the Victim Advocate that steps in to stay with and assist the family, so it is important that confirmation of notification with date and time go back to primary Victim Advocate. That will help to make follow-up efficient and timely. It may be important to have a “Gatekeeper” for this phase of the incident. That individual can oversee all notification issues to be sure that notifications are proper, timely, and that there is good communication.

I. Once the coroner’s office has confirmed the identity of the deceased, the gatekeeper will identify notification teams who will strategize their response.

1. Team members for notification can include:

- Victim Advocate
- Law Enforcement
- Coroner’s investigator
- Family assigned Public Information Officer

2. Checklist for notifications

- Name of the family to be notified
- Relationship to deceased
- Home address
- Phone
- Work address
- Phone

3. Deceased’s information

- Name, DOB, Home address, Work information
- Available information as to how death occurred

II. In a large incident, there may be a staging area or other organizational location. The Notification Gatekeeper would likely be at this location. Supplies and structure needed at staging area may include:

1. Copier

2. Whiteboard to track notifications and information such as:

- Individual family information
- Who is providing each notification
- Completed notification information
- Assignment board to designate one team to one deceased and their families
- Communication mechanism to maintain contact with the notification teams in order to obtain essential information
- All information collected from Notification Form and notification teams.

III. This notification team, or part of that team, should be assigned to the family for the duration of the initial event and should be the point of contact for the family. This team will be responsible for communicating critical information to the Families, ideally before information is released to the public. This team has the responsibility for relaying all information back to the organizational location to the Notification Gatekeeper for placement on Notification board.

IV. Gatekeepers will ensure the following is in place before a team departs from the death notification

- Family contact information
- Family Support system
- Death/Grief booklet
- Victim Rights Act brochure
- Victim Compensation information

V. Information to be returned to the notification gatekeeper will include

1. Notification specific information

- Date and time of notification
- Location of Notification
- Who was notified
 - Names of family members
 - Relationship
 - Contact information for family members

2. Notification Team Information

- Names of team members
- Agency of each team member
- Contact information of each team member
- Any other pertinent information

VI. Death Notification in the Work Place

1. Survivors often must be notified at their work place.
2. Often you may obtain assistance from Security or Human Resources in a large workplace.
3. 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 other than to say you have an emergency message for the person. Ask the manager or supervisor to arrange for a private room in which to make the notification.
4. Follow the basic notification procedures.

5. 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 in a clean uniform to be present or available shortly to answer medical questions.
6. Inform simply and directly.
7. Provide assistance and guidance.
8. Ask if survivors wish to spend time with the body of the deceased.
9. Designated personnel should be available to explain the procedure of identification of the deceased, and explain autopsy or organ donation, if appropriate. This designee will differ in jurisdictions and could be the coroner representative, law enforcement advocate, hospital personnel, or organ donation personnel.
10. Volunteer to help notify others. Make a list of any calls made for the family and case management.
11. The family should be shielded from any media at the hospital. Any media requests should be referred appropriately.
12. Do not leave survivors alone. Be sure someone is there to accompany them.
13. Fill out the whatever contact form is in use for your records.
14. Give survivors community resource information.
15. Be sure the survivor has your name and number.
16. Contact the survivor the next day.

VII. Death Notification in a Hospital Setting

1. While hospitals usually arrange for death notifications with their own personnel, in a major crisis with multiple victims law enforcement personnel and coroner personnel may be called on to do death notification at a hospital.
2. Best practice is for hospitals and other officials to determine general procedures and protocols in advance, so all parties are familiar with their duties and roles.
3. The basic principles of death notification apply in the hospital setting.
4. 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.
5. Inform simply and directly.

6. Provide assistance and guidance.
7. Ask if survivors wish to spend time with the body of the deceased.
8. Designated personnel should be available to explain the procedure of identification of the deceased, and explain autopsy or organ donation, if appropriate. This designee will differ in jurisdictions and could be the coroner representative, law enforcement advocate, hospital personnel, and/or organ donation personnel.
9. Volunteer to help notify others. Make a list of any calls made for the family and case management.
10. The family should be shielded from any media at the hospital. Any media requests should be referred appropriately.
11. Do not leave survivors alone. Be sure someone is there to accompany them.
12. Fill out the whatever contact form is in use for your records
13. Give survivors Community Resource information.
14. Be sure the survivor has your name and number.
15. Contact the survivor the next day.

VIII. Out of area notifications

1. Out of area notifications can be arranged through local law enforcement, coroner, and/or FBI
2. One law enforcement advocate should be assigned to each family for out of town notifications with agreement from the Coroner.
 - This person will be the main point of contact for this family for the duration of the initial event
 - This person is responsible for the coordination of the death notification which may include:
 - Researching information about the jurisdiction where the family resides
 - Finding out how the local agency does death notifications
 - Contacting law enforcement in the appropriate jurisdiction where the family resides
 - Determining the information that the law enforcement agency will need
 - Providing teletype or other information required from the assisting law enforcement agency

IX. Other agencies that may be of assistance include:

1. FBI Victim Assistance
2. Local law enforcement
3. Red Cross
4. DEMORT Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Teams Region VIII (MT, ND, SD, WY, UT, CO)
<http://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/responders/ndms/teams/Pages/dmort.aspx>

DEMORT Responds only at the request of the Jurisdictional Coroner and will report to the Coroner