

*Police Officer Standards
and
Training Council*



*Uniform Policy for
Notifications in Death and
Related Events*

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State of Connecticut

Police Officer Standards and Training Council

I. Uniform Procedures: Notification in Death and Related Events

A. Public Act 08-67, amending Section 14-108a of the Connecticut General Statutes, directed the P.O.S.T. Council to establish a uniform policy for identifying and notifying a member of a person's family or household with respect to any motor vehicle accident in which a person is killed.

1. The Council recognizes that death and illness notifications are difficult and emotional assignments, distressing for both the recipient and the officer. Furthermore, a death notification represents, for the surviving family or household member, the first information about a loss likely to be both traumatic and a life changing event. Planned, thoughtful and caring delivery of sad news provides a supportive and respectful basis upon which the recipient may begin to grieve.
2. This recommended procedure, adaptable for any death notification, or for persons injured or ill, is divided into the following topics:
 - Collecting Information
 - Timing and Consideration of the Setting
 - Personal Introduction
 - Identification of the Family or Household Member
 - Delivering the Message and Its Expression
 - Information and Assistance
 - Dealing with Property
 - Coping Strategies

B. Collecting Information.

1. Prior to making any notification, officers should seek out as much information as it is reasonably possible to get, particularly in instances where they are not themselves the investigators of the event. Some of the information that would be helpful includes:
 - name of the deceased
 - nature or cause of death
 - when and where the death occurred
 - where the body is and restrictions on recovery (legal issues)
 - if any identification is required by a next-of-kin
 - an address that may be visited to claim the body
 - a telephone number that may be called
 - with whom to speak at that number and

- the relationship of the person(s) to be contacted to the deceased.
2. In instances where the officer is performing a “locate and notify” assignment (the death event is not the officer’s case or is in another jurisdiction), the officer should verify any telephone contact numbers prior to the notification to ensure that the first active contact attempt by the family is successful.
 3. Any unsuccessful attempt to make an in-person contact with a family member also requires sensitivity in handling. Officers shall not leave impersonal notes or forwarding messages at a contact location: any messages left should ask that the family member contact the officer leaving the note, by name, rather than directing the person to call any other person (e.g., at a hospital or in another jurisdiction). Officers shall keep a record of all contact attempts, successful or not.
 4. Occasionally, continuing investigations delay the release of a victim’s body and the family or household member must be told that they can not move to claim it immediately. In such cases, officers must inform family members of:
 - How details will continue to become known to them
 - What further is happening that yet needs to be accomplished
 - Who is in charge of the event and its aftermath
 - What the family member should do while waiting.

Unless at-scene identification is necessary, next-of-kin or family members should not be brought to a crime or accident scene.

C. Timing and Consideration of the Setting.

1. Law enforcement notification of family or household members should be delivered promptly, as soon after the event as is practicable. While there is no “good” time to deliver sad news, officers need to keep in mind that notifications delivered in the middle of the night or in circumstances or settings that themselves present significant distractions require particular care and consideration. Arranging for a private room for the conversation is recommended.
2. Two officers should be assigned to deliver death notifications whenever possible, with at least one officer in uniform.
3. Officers should make an effort to not leave a survivor alone after a notification.

D. Personal Introduction.

1. The highly personal information officers bring is delivered in an interaction between strangers which only increases feelings of discomfort for all parties. Offering business cards with contact information is very helpful in these circumstances. When possible, plain clothes officers should be accompanied by a uniformed officer.
2. Since sensitivity and compassion are increased with understanding and association, whenever possible officers should seek the assistance and accompaniment of clergy, a relative or other known person.
3. An officer's introduction should be made with simple clear statements as they are easiest to follow while mechanical, formal and impersonal delivery of statements, as if by rote, increase confusion and anxiety. The importance of projecting concern, empathy and gravity cannot be overemphasized.

E. Identification of the Family or Household Member.

1. Officers need to know with whom they are speaking in terms of both names and relationships. Limiting the size of a group when delivering a death notification should mainly focus on protecting "vulnerable" people, such as small children or the elderly, from hearing distressing information from a non-family member in a somewhat impersonal way. Asking to move to a more private area to deliver sensitive information should be considered if the situation seems to suggest it. Family members, however, can provide emotional support for each other and should receive the information contemporaneously.
2. Multiple notifications present logistical problems and may not allow personal visits but officers should attempt to determine if the separations necessitate an individual notification or if the family members who are initially notified will make the additional contacts.

F. Translating.

1. If the family or household member does not speak English, the officer will need a translator. Occasionally, it will appear necessary to use a child in the household to assist but that should be avoided. Children should not be expected or requested to assume the psychological burden of translating a death notification and officers should not rely on children to accurately translate this type of critical information. Instead, the officer should ask the child to recommend a nearby adult who also speaks English and can be of assistance.

G. Delivering the Message and Its Expression.

1. Officers should begin with a very brief “preparation statement” reviewing the circumstances surrounding the death to the extent it is known. The family or household members will be anxious and will not benefit from an involved, lengthy report. Still, a brief statement will provide a few seconds for the family to mentally prepare.
2. The “core message” should include the deceased’s name not a relationship (son, daughter, husband, wife) as it may not be the same relationship for each person present and it may be incorrect. The word “died” is very important and should be repeated. Terms such as expired, passed or fatally injured are confusing to people under stress. The message should not be misunderstood. Messages should also avoid impersonal words such as body, remains or corpse.
3. Officers should express empathy. Officers should be prepared to listen and answer questions honestly, to the extent that they can do so. The notifying officer should remain calm and offer respectful support.

H. Information and Assistance.

1. Family and household members may have questions that officers can answer at the time of notification. They may ask that other persons also be notified, ask the officer who else needs to be notified, or ask how to tell others. It may become an appropriate time to try to locate additional supporting members of the family, or local clergy if that has not yet been done. Officers should assist household or family members by making other contacts, if asked and within reason. As previously noted, separated families may present cause for multiple notifications and officers should seek to determine if, and to what extent, such a need is present.
2. If children who are in school need to be informed immediately, most schools have a counselor who may be called upon to assist with the communication. Some employers may have a “human resources” department which can provide support as well.
3. All questions pertaining to organ or tissue donation need to be referred to a hospital staff or family doctor. Autopsy requirements are governed by law but issues relating to autopsy or even transportation of remains frequently involve cultural, ethnic or religious questions.
4. In the event the death relates to a law enforcement incident that involves a report, the incident number, along with any other reporting

officer names, should be provided to family and household members contacted.

5. Some deaths may lead to family contact by members of the news media. Officers should be aware of that possibility and alert family or household members to that possibility and family members are not under any obligation to speak with media representatives.

I. Dealing with Property.

1. Property in the possession of a deceased at the time of death should not be turned over to family or household members at the time of the notification. An agency property report should be completed and all property should be accounted for and entered into storage at the law enforcement unit. Arrangements should be made for the next-of-kin to obtain the property in a dignified manner carefully accounting for all property passing through the care of the police department.
2. Officers should inquire about the need to secure any property of the deceased in the absence of a family member taking responsibility. For example, the person notified may not be able to also secure a deceased's residence and related property. All reasonable efforts must be made to arrange for appropriate security of such property.
3. If any property of a deceased, or of a person seriously ill or injured, is to be brought to any family or household member, or secured from them for safe keeping, the use of any "garbage bags" or similar containers is to be avoided. Property to be returned should be folded (e.g., clothing) or otherwise appropriately presented. A list of what is to be turned over to family should be given and discussed prior to its presentation since it may include items that are damaged, stained, ripped, or those that have been cut off a person.