



Risk Management Solutions



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Death Notifications: *Delivering a Difficult Message with Compassion*

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Death notifications are among the most difficult duties an officer can be called on to perform. Unfortunately, very few officers have the necessary training on how to conduct these notifications. In fact, many police departments do not have written policies providing guidance on the issue. Early in my law enforcement career I attended the International Conference of Police Chaplains. There I received training on how to professionally deliver death notifications. Following that training, I was able to develop a written policy. Sadly, over my three-decade career I delivered more of these messages than I can recall. Early one summer afternoon, many years ago, I delivered a death notification I have not forgotten. Upon arrival a young woman answered my knock on the door. When I told her that her husband had been killed in an automobile accident she replied, “No it couldn’t be him because he just left the house.” It is common for the initial response to be disbelief. As she realized that it was her husband her next response was one I will never forget. Crying, she said, “No it can’t be,” stating that they had just had an argument as he left the house. I realized the seriousness of the message I was about to deliver as I pulled into the drive but her second response reaffirmed to me that human compassion was most needed at that moment. She was home alone, and I did not leave until I made sure she had someone there with her. Remaining with a lone individual is an important part of your death notification response plan.



“True compassion means not only feeling another’s pain but also being moved to help relieve it.”

~ Daniel Goleman

I gained the following knowledge through training, research and personal experience. I trust it will be helpful to you in developing a policy and training to guide your officers in their response to death notifications. Primarily, your department should have a written policy on how your officers should deliver these types of messages. **A professionally written policy should take the following suggestions into consideration:**

1. Obtain as much information as possible before delivering the notification. Be prepared to answer questions about the cause of death and the location of the deceased’s body. Have this information written down with contact names and direct phone numbers to coroners, medical examiners, police investigators, funeral homes, morgues or hospitals. If you receive a death notification from out of state, you may have to work to get this information; the family will need it, so be compassionate and do your due diligence. Before you leave the residence, if these questions are not addressed, give your written information to a family member or friend.
2. If possible, have two officers present to make the notification. Survivors may experience severe emotional or physical reactions (some even strike out at notifiers).
3. Before arrival, the two officers should decide who will speak and what will be said.
4. Identify yourself, and ask to come in. Try to never give the notification on the doorstep.
5. Deliver the message directly and in plain language. Avoid vague expressions such as “Michelle was lost” or “passed away.” Examples of plain language include: “Your daughter Michelle was in a car crash, and she was killed.” “Your husband was shot, and he died.” “Your father had a heart attack at work, and he died.” It may sound cruel to use plain language, but using vague words can build anxiety and confusion.
6. Remember your presence and compassion are your most important resources.

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Fire Extinguishers: Inspection and Use

Wade Campbell, ARM, GSP • Loss Control Representative • AMIC/MWCF Loss Control Division

Having the right fire extinguisher and knowing how to use it safely can make a huge difference between putting out a small fire and suffering a major loss. If the correct fire extinguisher is properly used, a small fire can be contained and extinguished quickly before people are injured or property is damaged.

There are many types and sizes of fire extinguishers available. Check with your local fire marshal to determine if you have the correct type/size extinguishers and if they are in the correct location. Fire extinguishers should be mounted on brackets or in wall cabinets with the top of the extinguisher at a maximum of 5 feet from the ground. Extinguishers over 40 pounds should be mounted at lower heights with the carrying handle about 3.5 feet from the floor. The extinguisher should be in plain view with unrestricted access; therefore, nothing should be hanging on or covering it. It is important to know the locations and the types of extinguishers in your workplace prior to using one.

Monthly Inspections Tips

Monthly fire extinguisher self-inspections can be completed in-house by one of your own employees. It is a simple process that can be completed with very little training. Below is a step-by-step guide to completing monthly fire extinguisher inspections:

- Ensure the fire extinguisher is in the designated place.
- Make sure the fire extinguisher is visible and/or there is signage in place indicating where the fire extinguisher is located.
- Determine if the fire extinguisher can be easily accessed.
- Ensure the pressure gauge is operable.
- Make sure the fire extinguisher is full.

Fire extinguishers should be inspected prior to and during installation. Records must be kept of each inspection. This information can be displayed on a fire extinguisher tag or on a separate paper or electronic file. The only details that are required for your records are the month and year of the inspection and the name of the person who performed the inspection.

Annual Inspections Tips

A full maintenance check needs to be performed every 12 months by a certified fire extinguisher inspector. Unlike the monthly inspections, the annual inspections must be administered by a licensed fire protection company. An inspector will come to your location and check all mechanical parts of your extinguishers.

The goal is to ensure that there are no expelling means and that the physical condition of each fire extinguisher is in good shape. In the event a fire extinguisher does not appear to be in working condition, an internal examination and testing may be required.

How to Use Tips

If a fire occurs, make sure everyone gets out of the building and that someone has contacted the local fire department. If you are in a position where you feel that you can safely extinguish a small fire and you have an escape route, remember the word **P.A.S.S.**



- **P - PULL** the pin from the extinguisher.
- **A - AIM** the nozzle or hose toward the base of the fire.
- **S - SQUEEZE** the handle to discharge the fire extinguishing agent.
- **S - SWEEP** the nozzle of the fire extinguisher from side to side until the fire is out.

There is no substitution for hands-on training when it comes to learning how to use a portable fire extinguisher. Training is intended to promote correct fire extinguisher use by every employee and is, therefore, not exclusive to fire departments. Through education and training, we can successfully mitigate the loss of life and property through proper use of fire extinguishers. The local fire department is an excellent resource for fire extinguisher training. ■

7. Plan to take time to provide information and support. Never simply notify and leave.
8. Offer to call a friend or family member who will come to support the survivor. Remain until the support arrives.
9. When the notification is in the workplace ask to speak to a manager or supervisor and request that they arrange for a private room. Then follow the previously mentioned notification procedures.

As with any written policy, you should be careful with the word “shall.” Any time you specify that an officer shall do something you take away their discretion. Officers should never deliver a death notification by phone unless necessary. The first policy I implemented on death notifications stated officers “shall” never deliver a death notification over the phone. I would later have to revise the policy. A local resident was traveling home from out of state and had called a neighbor to walk over next door and check on her husband who she could not get to answer the phone. The neighbor remained on the phone with her as she walked over to her house where she found her husband dead. She panicked and abruptly ended the call. The spouse repeatedly attempted to call the neighbor back realizing that something terrible was wrong. The police department responded to the death. The spouse began calling the police department inquiring about her husband. I learned that she was en route by vehicle from out of state with her adult son. I had dispatch transfer her call to my office, and I asked her son to safely pull off the road. I then delivered the death notification. I still believe phone notifications should only be done in rare circumstances.

Some people have better people skills and are more compassionate than others. Police officers are no different. The final advice I would offer is to select officers you believe are suited best to deliver these difficult notifications.

If your agency does not have a written policy on death notifications, you can download one from our Loss Control website at www.losscontrol.org by clicking on “Reference Documents” and entering “Death Notifications” in the search field. ■

Defining Moment: Space Heater Precautions

When there is a chill in the air, a space heater can be helpful in providing heat to a smaller coverage area. However, space heaters present dangers, such as electrical shock and fire hazards.

Follow these precautions to stay safe:

- Make sure your space heater is recognized by a qualified testing laboratory by checking its label.
- Read all instructions and warning labels before using a space heater.
- Always check for damaged/cracked plugs or wires, and do not use the heater if they are damaged.
- Never use space heaters for anything except providing supplemental heat. That includes drying clothing, thawing pipes and cooking food.
- Place space heaters on a flat, level surface at least three feet away from flammable materials, such as drapes, papers, rugs, clothing and office trash cans.
- Never place a space heater on top of a table or other furniture.
- Never leave a space heater on while unattended. Turn it off when leaving a room or going to sleep.
- Keep children and pets away from space heaters.
- Do not use extension cords or power strips with space heaters.

Law Enforcement SAMPLE Policies

To assist you in your department’s policy development the AMIC/MWCF Loss Control Division has numerous sample policies listed on our website. You can access these sample police policies at: www.losscontrol.org, click on **Reference Documents**, enter **PSOP** in the search field, and select a specific policy to review. Each sample policy can be downloaded as a Word document for easy adaptation. **It is recommended that you revisit this site periodically as policies are continuously updated or added.** In addition, the AMIC/MWCF Loss Control Division may have additional sample SOPs and other reference documents available for your consideration upon request.

Employment Practices Law Hotline

1-800-864-5324

Through a toll-free Employment Practices Law Hotline, members can speak directly with an attorney specializing in employment-related issues. When faced with a potential employment situation, the hotline provides a no-cost, 30-minute consultation.

www.losscontrol.org

2024 SKIDCAR Schedule

Through an advanced, computer-controlled driver training vehicle known as the SKIDCAR System, trainees learn how to react quickly and safely to a range of hazardous driving conditions. Training is conducted throughout the state at a minimal cost. If you would like to schedule or host a SKIDCAR session in your area, please contact **Donna Wagner** at (334) 386-8125.



January 16 - 19	Montgomery	June 18 - 28	Dothan
February 13 - 23	Orange Beach	August 13 - 23	Decatur
March 12 - 22	Roanoke	September 9 - 18	Anniston
April 9 - 19	Muscle Shoals	October 15 - 25	Andalusia
May 14 - 24	Wetumpka	November 12 - 22	Oneonta

Register and pay online at www.losscontrol.org!



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