

## BETHLEHEM POLICE STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

**SUBJECT: DEATH NOTIFICATION**

CALEA STD. REF.

AMENDS/SUPERSEDES:

REVISED:

EFFECTIVE DATE: 9/2007

APPROVED: 9/2007

**NOTE:** In any civil action against any individual, agency or governmental entity, including the State of New Hampshire, arising out of the conduct of a law enforcement officer having the powers of a peace officer, standards of conduct embodied in policies, procedures, rules, regulations, codes of conduct, orders or other directives of a State, County or Local law enforcement agency shall not be admissible to establish negligence when such standards of conduct are higher than the standard of care which would otherwise have been applicable under State Law. (RSA 516:36).

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**INDEX WORDS:** Death notification; survivor.

### **I. PURPOSE:**

This standard operating procedure will provide officers with guidelines for notifying the survivors of the death of a family or household member.

### **II. DEFINITIONS:**

- A. Whenever they appear in this general order, unless specifically defined otherwise, the following words and phrases shall have the meaning ascribed to them in this section.
1. Survivor: A close relative or friend of the deceased, whether a spouse, parent, sibling, or child. or an unmarried person living in the same household with the deceased.

### **III. DISCUSSION:**

Making death notifications is a difficult task for any officer, no matter how experienced he or she may be. We are naturally hesitant to deal with the subject of death. Without guidance, we may use inappropriate methods, or make comments or remarks that may actually add to the mental distress of survivors. Officers should become familiar with concepts and procedures that will provide surviving family members with sufficient useful information and support consistent with professionally accepted crisis intervention techniques.

#### IV. PROCEDURE:

- A. All death messages shall be delivered in person unless some emergency mandates telephone notification.
- B. You should be prepared to spend sufficient time with survivors to provide the assistance described in this standard operating procedure.
- C. Prior to contacting survivors, you should gather and familiarize yourself with essential details concerning the deceased, including full name, age, race, and home address, and details of the death, location of the body and personal effects, and any other pertinent information. Attempt to find out anything about the survivors that may be pertinent to effecting the death notification, such as whether they are elderly, disabled, visually or hearing impaired, or do not speak English. If possible, determine the name of the survivor's closest relative, friend, family doctor or clergyman to assist you, and a list of referral agencies that you can leave with the survivor.
- D. Try and determine who is the closest living relative of the deceased for purposes of notification, starting with a spouse and followed by parents, brothers or sisters, then children. If a significant other is involved, it may be necessary to notify both the closest living relative and the significant other. If in doubt, contact a supervisor for guidance.
- E. If another jurisdiction or department must be utilized to make the notification, request that they make it in person, and that they provide immediate verification that it has been accomplished.
- F. Avoid using the name of the deceased over the radio prior to notifying survivors, and avoid giving the name to the news media before survivors have been notified.
- G. Where staffing permits, two officers, preferably a male and a female, or an officer and the Police Chaplain, or a victim/witness advocate should be utilized to deliver death notifications. Do not deliver personal effects of the deceased to survivors at the time of death notification.
- H. Upon arrival at the survivor's residence or place of business, check the accuracy of the location and ask to speak first to the immediate survivor. Identify yourself by name, rank and department, verify the relationship of the survivor to the deceased, and ask permission to enter the location and move to a place of privacy. Make every reasonable effort to make the notification away from public view.
- I. Prior to making notification, where possible, bring members of the family together who may be on hand at the location. Ask everyone to sit down if possible.

Address them in a straightforward manner. Use compassionate but easy to understand language to briefly explain the circumstances of the incident and the fact the individual is dead. Do not hold out false hopes that the individual is still living or may survive if he or she is in fact dead. Do not use terms such as "passed on", "no longer with us", etc., in order to avoid using the term "dead".

- a. Avoid using graphic descriptions of violent acts, or police jargon. Refer to the deceased by their first name or relationship such as "your brother, your son", etc.
  - b. Be prepared for unexpected or even violent responses, including hysteria or even verbal or physical attack on you. Grief can manifest itself in many different ways.
  - c. Provide survivors with sufficient time to regain their composure before proceeding. Avoid trite phrases such as "I know how hard this must be for you", "I feel your pain", or "I know how you feel". Such phrases often worsen the situation.
- J. Do not leave upon completion of the notification unless you are reasonably sure the survivor has adequate personal control and the immediate support of family or close friends. Consider the survivor's emotional reaction and apparent physical condition, the availability of other supportive adults at the location, needed care of infants or small children, the home environment including alcohol or drug use, lack of transportation or financial support, and availability of family, friends, good neighbors, clergy, etc.
1. Remain alert to the possible need for medical aid. If you are pre-alerted to serious medical conditions prior to notification, you may wish to have medical personnel standing by.
  2. To avoid confusing survivors, speak slowly and deliberately. Write down addresses such as the hospital where the deceased was taken. Leave your business card so you may be re-contacted. Provide any additional information that the survivor requests, such as the cause of death or condition of the body, or other details if you know them.
- K. Assess the survivor's physical and mental state before securing from the location. Do not leave a lone survivor unattended until you have made all reasonable efforts to garner first-hand support from family, friends, clergy, counselors, or others. Assure yourself that the survivor can take care of himself/herself and anyone they are responsible for at that location before you leave. Be sure they are thinking clearly, were aware of what you told them, have a grasp of place and time, demonstrate a progressive ability to express themselves, have begun to grasp the

reality of what has happened, and have reasonable control over their emotions and are not displaying either no apparent emotion (in shock), blind rage, or suicidal ideation.

- I. When practicable, plan to conduct a follow-up visit within 24 hours if there is concern for the survivor's well-being.