



Making Notification of Next of Kin

Upon the death or serious injury of a firefighter, the Chief or designee should immediately be notified. In the case of a line-of-duty death, it is imperative that this communication is made without delay.

During notifications, it is imperative that accurate information be passed quickly and discretely. The media and private citizens monitor our radio traffic regularly. Names of dead or injured firefighters **SHALL NEVER** be given over the fire department radio. Use the telephone to conduct all communications of this sensitive nature.

Upon receipt of this tragic news, the Chief, or designee, (if the Chief is unavailable) should coordinate the following:

Assemble a Notification Team:

- Chief or Acting Chief
- Family Liaison Officer (Chief selects individual)
- Fire Department Chaplain/Clergy
- A firefighter friend of the family or close civilian family friend

The importance of the NEXT OF KIN NOTIFICATION cannot be over-emphasized. This process will set the tone for many difficult days, weeks, months, and years for the surviving family. Sensitivity and compassion are imperative.

Family notification should be made as quickly as possible to avoid the family receiving a notification from another outside party. The media will employ many efforts to seek out the name of the fallen first responder. You must use all necessary measures to protect the next of kin from unwanted media exposure. For this reason, the Notification Team will need to assemble rapidly.

If the fallen firefighter's family resides far enough out of the area as to make your departments participation in the notification impractical, contact the local Fire/Police agency in the area to assist in a timely notification.

Another distinct possibility is that your Department could experience a loss of more than one member. This would require multiple notification teams to be assembled and deployed.

Before you arrive at the residence, verify latest information, and **DECIDE WHO WILL SPEAK, AND WHAT THAT PERSON WILL SAY.**

A word of warning, the family may strike out and blame the Department for their loss. For this reason, the initial notification and how the department handles it is extremely important.

Steps to be taken at the residence:

It may become necessary to have BLS/ALS Ambulance standing by if the people receiving the news are medically vulnerable. If this is done, have the apparatus stage near the residence, but not in view.

At the door identify yourself and ask to come in. (Notification should take place in a private setting.)

When inside, be sure you are notifying the right person.

Get people in a comfortable or relaxed setting: the most important function of the person making the notification is to put all of the known basic facts into one sentence and tell them. Make sure your message is absolutely clear and direct.

They ALREADY suspect why you have come.

Begin with "I'm very sorry to tell you". Let them know how it happened, "Your husband/wife/son/daughter died responding to a fire," or "Bob was killed in a building collapse."

Allow the family to express their emotions. Do not try to talk them out of their grief. This is a very sad time. **Do not mask your own grief.**

Provide only the facts you know, **never speculate**. If you cannot answer a question, find out the correct answer and get back to them.

Phrases or words to avoid:

- a. **"I know how you feel."**
- b. **"It was God's will."**
- c. **"Life will go on."**
- d. **"He would have wanted to go this way."**
- e. **"Be brave."**
- f. **"Passed away."**

Use the victim's first name when referring to your fallen member.

Ask if the department can assist by notifying immediate family members (parents, brothers, and sisters). Ask if the department can pick up any children who may be away at this time. With the permission of the next of kin, the department can help setup a support system:

- a. Clergy
- b. Relatives
- c. Friends

Do not take any of the victim's personal items with you at this time.

If the survivor(s) ask to see the deceased, even if the body is badly disfigured **you should obtain clearance from Medical Examiners Office**. People often have a need to see, touch and hold the deceased; otherwise they may be in denial. This is often very helpful in the family's grief process. It gives a sense of finality/closure.

If family members wish to see the deceased, arrangements need to be made rapidly for the viewing. **No viewing will be conducted at the Office of Chief Medical Examiner except under extreme circumstances**. Sensitivity to the family is very important. Provide the best possible environment and avoid delays that heighten the family's anxiety.

Offer to transport the family to the location of the member and help prepare them for what they will see. **Do not let them drive**. If you transport the family, turn off your radio and/or advise dispatch that you are transporting the relatives and, if possible, switch to an alternate channel, or communicate by cell phone.

If the Department's Family Liaison Officer is not present at the notification, the family should be given the name prior to the team departing. Write down his/her telephone and pager numbers. If possible, the family should already know this person. Have one member of the Department stay with the family, unless the family declines.

Advise the family that the Family Liaison Officer will contact them to assist with the necessary arrangements.

Advise the family of possible media calls. Unwanted media exposure will only add to the difficulty of this tragedy. Suggest that a friend of the family screens their incoming calls. Also let them know who the department PIO is and provide them with their contact information.

Assure the family that their wishes are the Departments number one concern.

Having an autopsy completed may assist the family in obtaining benefits from the Public Safety Officer Benefit Program.

Ensure that the family understands that they do not have to make any immediate decisions regarding services, mortuary, wills, etc.

Before leaving the residence, try to set a time for a Family Planning Meeting. There are decisions that will need to be made by the family that will shape the planning process. This meeting should take place within the first 24 hours.

Never leave immediately after making a notification. Do not leave people without a support system. Wait for others to arrive.

Arrange for Police to stay at surviving family's home during viewing, memorial, and funeral services. This will help reduce the chance of criminals breaking into the family's homes while they're attending services. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has reported that due to increase publicity of the firefighter(s) death or injury, criminals like to take advantage of grieving families.