

# ***Fire Service Line of Duty Death (LODD)***

## **Colorado Fallen Firefighters Response Team**

### **Death Notification and Survivor Support**

#### **For Firefighters and Civilians**

By Chaplain Ken Rice

## **Introduction**

I am indebted to the late Condé Bliven, former chaplain of Elk Creek Fire Department, and her classic work: *Taking Care of Our Own, A Resource Guide for Line of Duty Deaths*. This is an update to her work. When the worst happens to the best, it becomes the toughest situation a fire department will face. It is an overwhelming event especially for agencies and individuals that are ill prepared. Providing *appropriate* death notification and survivor support is a significant undertaking. **Much of the following can be applied to civilian deaths as well.**

## **Preplanning**

- Require every department member to complete an Emergency Contact Information Form at least annually.
- These forms may be needed at a time when the office is closed and the forms are locked in a file cabinet. For immediate access to the forms when needed, keep copies (in sealed envelopes) in the command vehicle that responds to most incidents. Access should be available to the chaplain and others who will be on the notification team.
- Have a checklist of things to do immediately in the event of a firefighter serious injury or death. The checklist should fit your department and jurisdiction. It should be prepared *now*, not after the fact.

## **Making Death Notification**

Death notification to next of kin (NOK) should be made in person, not by phone except as a last resort. Notification must be made as quickly as possible to avoid information coming from an inappropriate source and in an improper manner. Notification to NOK should be verified prior to releasing information to others.

Make sure the decedent has been positively identified. You must not err on who died! The order of notification priority is: spouse, adult sons and daughters, parents, adult brothers and sisters, a guardian of the decedent at the time of death. It is also the order of importance for *in person* notifications. It is okay to make notification to others by phone.

There can be exceptions to the order of priority. For example: husband and wife have been in an accident. Husband dies in an emergency room; wife is in another ER room.

If the medical staff believes that the stress from notification would aggravate the wife's serious medical condition, wait.

If friends of the decedent are present without the NOK, ask them to let you or another trained person make the initial notification. This can help assure that it will be done correctly and less emotionally. Once done, friends can begin speaking with NOK. If it is a death that the coroner will investigate, those present when the person died need to remain until the coroner arrives so they can answer questions.

### **Out of Area NOK Notification**

- Contact a law enforcement agency in the NOK's area. Ask if they have a chaplain or know of one that may be available to make a person to person death notification. Get the name and contact numbers of the contactor. Give information only to the person making the notification. Ask the person to provide your contact information to the family so they can call you for further information.
- If a chaplain is not available you may need to use a law enforcement officer. The officer may need a little coaching. You don't want him to make a blunt notification and promptly walk away. Further, he needs to know what and what not to say as indicated below. Ask him to report back to you ASAP.
- In large metro areas the emergency command center may require a telex from your local law enforcement agency to provide contact information in order to be assured it is not a hoax. They will be responsible for sending uniformed officers or a chaplain to make notification in person.
- If all else fails, and you must make a phone notification to NOK, ask them who they can contact in the area to come and be with them. It is not a good time for a survivor to be alone. The decedent's cell phone may contain NOK names and numbers.
- If the body is to be shipped out of the area, advise the NOK to contact a funeral home in the receiving area. The receiving funeral home will make all arrangements through their network. One call does all.

### **In Person Notification Approach**

- If you are at the hospital with the decedent, "Joe," and the NOK is within a few hours' drive, call her and tell her that Joe has been in an accident, or has had a heart attack (or whatever has happened), and that he is in the hospital. Ask if she can come. Give directions and ask about what time she thinks she will be there. Get her cell phone number. Caution her to drive safely. If possible, avoid saying more on the phone.
- If NOK is local and the situation lends itself to giving notice at her home, go as a team of at least two but not more than four. You don't want a crowd to show up.

- Decide who will be the primary speaker and what he or she will say.
- Go in separate vehicles in case someone, such as a chaplain, remains with the survivors longer than others or someone may need a ride to the hospital.
- Unless you know the person that comes to the door, verify who she or he is. “Are you Bill Smith’s wife?” You could be at the wrong address!
- Identify yourselves and ask, “May we come in for a moment?” You don’t want neighbors to hear what you have to say or to see the reaction that may follow. If she (or he) knows what you are there for, she may slam the door and yell at you to go away. Be prepared. Her sudden adrenalin rush will usually last for only a few seconds. Wait it out. She will want information.
- As you enter, read the room and be prepared for reactions that can range from serenity to violence and even physical attack. Don’t take things personally. Gain control of the situation.
- “Mrs. Smith, I have some bad news for you. Is there anyone else at home?” If yes, “Would you want them to join us or to leave?” Don’t begin until all that should be present are there.
- If young children are present, a member of the team (or a family friend or neighbor) should take them to another room or a home nearby. They don’t need to be frightened and confused by initial expressions of grief that may occur in adults. Adults need to be able to express their grief freely.
- If someone becomes hysterical and remains hysterical too long, you might gently put your hands on his or her shoulders and calmly say, “Okay, take some deep breaths; you need to calm down so we can talk.”
- If someone starts to leave the room, a team member should ask if they are okay and walk out with them. They may be going for a weapon to commit suicide or to kill you. (I’m not joking!)
- Children can return when the situation is calm. That’s the time to share thoughts and tears with them. The death should be explained to children in simple straight-forward terms. Answer their questions honestly and *give them assurance that they are loved and will be cared for.*
- Parents can be good role models by grieving openly with them and sharing memories. It’s best not to say, “You are now the man [or ‘woman’] of the house.” A child does not need to feel extra responsibility now.
- If paper and crayons are available, give them to the young children to draw and color pictures. This can be therapeutic for them, and give you an idea of what is on their minds.
- If making notification at the NOK’s workplace, ask to see him or her somewhere where you can talk privately. You may need to ask the

supervisor first. Tell the supervisor that you have some very bad news for the employee, and that you need to tell the employee first.

- If death is pronounced at the hospital and the NOK is there, let the attending physician give the notice to the NOK. He is the most qualified to give explanation and answer questions.
- If you know the person is dead or unsurvivable prior to the doctor being available, you might say things like, "The medical staff is doing everything they can, but it does not look good." "Be prepared for the worst." "The doctor will come and talk to you as soon as he can."

### **The Verbal Notification**

- Because one of the first reactions is denial, do not use soft terms such as *passed away, didn't make it, or gone to a better place*. Be compassionate but use clear terms such as *died, killed, dead*. "Judy, there has been an accident and Bill was killed. He suffered a heart attack and died while driving." (Avoid elaboration of gory details.)
- Things to say: "I'm very sorry for your loss" (accompanied with a hug if you are comfortable with that). "Are there any phone calls I can make for you?" "What can I do for you at this time"? Look for needs and make specific offers to help.
- Do *not* say things like: "I understand how you feel." You don't! "You're young and can remarry." "It's good that you have other children." "Everything will be all right." "It must have been God's will." "Time will heal." Don't tell them about a loss you may have had. At the moment, they are really not interested. Don't make promises you can't keep.
- Answer questions honestly, but don't say more than you should and don't speculate. Rather than responding to a question with, "I don't know," it is better to say, "I'll find out for you," or "That's under investigation; I'll let you know when the information is available." Don't make them feel like they can't handle it by saying things like, "You don't need to know that," or, "I can't tell you that."
- If the death has just occurred, the family may appear fragile and need some time to cry and begin processing what has happened especially if the death was sudden and unexpected. It may take a half-hour to an hour for them to calm down. Crying is healthy and normal. Be patient. Resist feeling like you have to say something. Sometimes you can't improve on silence.
- You are providing a ministry of presence. Believe it or not, if they are experiencing emotional trauma, they won't remember a thing you say. Their brains are locked onto trying to process and accept what has just happened. They will, however, remember that you were there.

- When things have calmed down encourage (but don't pressure) them to talk. It is one of the most healing things they can do. Though painful, it is helpful for the bereaved to talk about how the death occurred. Also ask, "What are you having the most difficulty with at this time?" This question can be repeated on subsequent visits.
- Assure them that talking specifically about what's bothering them helps to accelerate emotional recovery. It is difficult, but suppressing or holding it in prolongs the emotional pain.
- The following phrases may help the griever feel free to open up and talk: "This must be very painful for you." "You must have been very close to her." "This must be hard to accept."
- Listen for possible suicidal indicators. If a suicidal tendency arises, it usually will be quite sometime after the death notification. At the time of notification if you hear a statement like, "I don't want to live without him," it is not likely to be suicidal.
- Whenever a person *does* seem suicidal, ask straight out, "Are you suicidal?" If yes, then ask, "Do you really want to die, or do you want to live differently?"

### **Following Notification**

- Provide the family the opportunity to see the body *if they want to*. This can be an important part of saying goodbye. Prepare them for what they will see. If the body is in the hospital, there will probably be a breathing tube in the mouth. Let the medical staff prepare the body for viewing. It is best to cover any part of the body that is horribly charred or disfigured. Just to see, rub, or kiss a head or an arm or a hand may be enough.
- In some cases it may be best to wait until the funeral home prepares the body for viewing. Some may want to remember their loved one as he or she was in the past and not view the body. *It is their choice* except that it is not good for young children to view the body unless they really want to.
- Collect all the decedent's prescription drugs for the coroner who will confiscate and destroy them. The coroner will also take the driver's license for positive ID and to help prevent identity theft. The NOK can keep a copy.
- Before leaving, write down important information for the primary survivor including the names and phone numbers of personnel who will work with the family. For a while, don't leave the survivor(s) alone unless they request it.
- To understand ongoing survivor reactions, see the chaplain's companion handout, "Coping with Grief Following a Death."
- Invite and encourage the surviving firefighter family to attend the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's official national weekend tribute during each October to firefighters who died in the line of duty during the previous

year. This takes place on a beautiful campus in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The foundation provides travel, lodging and meals for immediate survivors of fallen firefighters being honored.

- Families can receive emotional assistance through a Fire Service Survivors Network. The network matches survivors with similar experiences and circumstances. Families receive quarterly newsletters and specialized grief resources.
- There is also a Colorado Fallen Firefighters Foundation, which holds an annual memorial service in Lakewood on a Saturday in May. When an LODD occurs, the CFFF will provide an immediate check in the amount of \$2000 to the next of kin.

## Who Ya Gonna Call?

It's difficult to deal with a LODD if prepared, more difficult if unprepared. There are roughly 20 things that need to be done within the first 24 hours. The Colorado Fallen Firefighters Response Team (CFFRT) has had specialized training and can help. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation refers to the team as LAST (Local Assistance State Team). During a time when the ability to function can become impaired, the team is available to assist and support families and fire departments of fallen firefighters ***if requested***.

A team has been established in each state by the Department of Justice through the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. The team will not self-dispatch. It will not do anything without consulting your chief or the chief's designee. The goal is to work transparently. When the worst happens to the best, **call the hotline at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation: 866-736-5868. They will contact the Colorado Fallen Firefighters Response Team.**

## **Firefighters Funeral Options**

**Badge shrouds are to be horizontal for LODDs and diagonal for other deaths.** The following is merely a quick guide for options. The next-of-kin should be involved in deciding on funeral options, but some consistency is important to maintain fairness. Consideration should be given to giving the “Retired Member” the same options as “Line of Duty,” especially if he or she is a recent retiree still known by many in the department. The retiree may have a history of service that deserves special recognition and remembrance.

| Options                     | Line of Duty | Active Member | Retired Member | Support Staff |
|-----------------------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Casket on Apparatus (Cason) | Yes          |               |                |               |
| Flag Lowered, Municipal     | Yes          |               |                |               |
| Bunting of Fire Station     | Yes          |               |                |               |
| Bunting of Fire Apparatus   | Yes          |               |                |               |
| Honor Guard                 | Yes          | Yes           |                |               |
| Tolling of the Bell         | Yes          | Yes           |                |               |
| "Last Call" (Alarm)         | Yes          | Yes           |                |               |
| Flag Draped Casket          | Yes          | Yes           | If a Veteran   |               |
| Burial in Uniform           | Yes          | Yes           |                |               |
| Badge Plaque                | Yes          | Yes           |                |               |
| Bag Pipes                   | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Department Grave Marker     | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Pall Bearers                | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Playing of Taps             | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Procession                  | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Flag Lowering at Station    | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Badge Shrouding             | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            |               |
| Post Service Reception      | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            | Yes           |
| Flowers on Apparatus        | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            | Yes           |
| Walk Through                | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            | Yes           |
| Services of Chaplain        | Yes          | Yes           | Yes            | Yes           |