

COLUMBIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Policy and Procedure Manual

DEATH AND EMERGENCY MESSAGE NOTIFICATION

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361 DEATH AND EMERGENCY MESSAGE NOTIFICATION

361.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This written directive will provide guidelines and procedures for officers and other personnel notifying next-of-kin of deceased, seriously injured, or seriously ill persons.

361.2 POLICY

It is the policy of the Columbia Police Department to make death notifications, notifications of seriously injured or seriously ill persons, and other emergency notifications to the appropriate receiving party. Notifications will be delivered in as prompt and considerate a manner as possible. Officers making these notifications will offer appropriate assistance or referrals to help ease the trauma of the news.

361.3 DEFINITIONS

Next-of-Kin: For purposes of this policy, the closest relative of the deceased or injured; for example, spouse, parents, siblings, significant other and adult children.

361.4 OFFICER RESPONSIBILITIES

The delivery of emergency notifications is an important police duty which must be performed in as professional, and timely a manner as possible. The style and context of the notification can have a substantial emotional significance for the recipient. It is the officer's duty to deliver this personal news in a concise, straightforward and compassionate way. The officer should approach the notification knowing it is his/her role to spend whatever time is necessary to calm and comfort the survivor(s) or next-of-kin and to assist in gaining access to any other support persons or services they may need.

361.4.1 GATHERING INFORMATION

Officers should be prepared with the following information prior to notifications:

- a. Gather essential details surrounding the deceased, seriously injured or ill person and the immediate survivor or next-of-kin.
 1. Name
 2. Age
 3. Sex
 4. Race
 5. Home address
 6. Location
 7. Nature and time of death (if applicable)

COLUMBIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Policy and Procedure Manual

DEATH AND EMERGENCY MESSAGE NOTIFICATION

8. Location of the body, sick or injured person
9. Location of personal effects
10. Any other information deemed necessary
- b. Ensure the deceased has been positively identified.
- c. The most immediate relative, starting with spouse and followed by parents, siblings and then adult children, should be the first to have knowledge of the death, serious injury or illness outside of any persons who were involved at the scene of the incident.
- d. If unavailable and there will be some delay in making contact, determine who the next closest relative would be. Other relatives should be contacted only when substantial delays would be required to make contact with the next-of-kin.
- e. When next-of-kin are located in another state or locality, officers should contact the appropriate law enforcement agency and request they conduct the notification in person and provide timely verification when the notification has been completed.
- f. If possible, try to obtain information about the next-of-kin that might create a problem during the notification:
 1. Physical / Health related problems
 2. Mental Health concerns
 3. Language barriers
 4. Elderly
 5. Disabled
 6. Visual or hearing impaired
- g. Avoid using the police radio to communicate information concerning the deceased, seriously injured or ill person.
- h. The Department shall make available a list of community referral agencies that may be helpful to provide to survivors.
- i. The name of the victim shall not be released to the media or other outside sources until the next-of-kin is notified. If the media has already obtained information related to the death, they should be asked to withhold the information until after the notifications have been completed.

361.4.2 NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES

The notification team should be comprised of at least one supervisor and an officer at a minimum. Time permitting; efforts should be made to contact the chaplain on call to assist with the notification. Officers should see to the following considerations:

- a. Verify the address at the survivor's or next-of-kin's home to make sure it is correct.
- b. A deceased's personal effects shall not be brought to the home during the notification.
- c. Officers should be permitted inside the home before the actual notification to ensure the survivor's or next-of-kin's need for personal privacy is not compromised.
- d. Verify the relationship of the survivor to the deceased.
- e. Officers shall identify themselves by name, rank and departmental affiliation.

COLUMBIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Policy and Procedure Manual

DEATH AND EMERGENCY MESSAGE NOTIFICATION

- f. Before beginning the notification, determine whether other adult members of the immediate family are at home. If so, they should all be brought together and told at once so the officer will not need to repeat the notification and to spare the family members present the task of doing this. It is preferred young children be excused until their parents can speak to them later.
- g. It is important the officer speak in plain language and in a straightforward fashion. Graphic details regarding the cause of death or injury, particularly in cases of violent accidents or murder, should not be discussed at this time.
- h. Officers should not use euphemisms such as “passed away” or “no longer with us” in order to avoid using the term “dead”, as these expressions may create confusion or false hope.
- i. It is best to refer to the deceased, seriously injured or ill persons by first name or by the relationship to the survivor/next-of-kin (son / daughter, etc.). Using references such as “body”, “corpse”, “deceased” or the “victim”, might be regarded as callous or uncaring by the family members.
- j. Officers should suggest survivors make a list of questions as they arise, to be handled during the follow-up.
- k. Officers should avoid using police jargon during the notification.
- l. When the death occurs in the hospital, if the next-of-kin or other family members are already present, it is the responsibility of the attending physician or other hospital designee to deliver the death notification.
- m. Survivors should be informed other law enforcement officers may need to question them at a future time. If it is imperative the survivors be questioned immediately after notification, questioning should be conducted compassionately.

361.4.3 POTENTIAL REACTIONS

Officers should be prepared for any type of reaction to the notification. Survivors or next-of-kin may:

- a. Faint or the news may precipitate a heart attack or other physical reaction which requires emergency first aid or professional medical attention.
- b. Become hysterical or angry and turn their hostility on the notifying officer. The importance of using two individuals for notifications is evident in both cases.

361.4.4 ANSWERING QUESTIONS AND MAKING REFERRALS

- a. The notifying officer should be prepared to answer questions regarding procedures for making funeral arrangements and other police procedures. This should be kept as simple as possible at this early stage.
- b. The notifying officer should avoid becoming involved in discussions about life insurance, social security benefits, etc.
- c. The officers making the notification should ensure all essential details are written down and left with the individual, to include;

COLUMBIA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Policy and Procedure Manual

DEATH AND EMERGENCY MESSAGE NOTIFICATION

1. Disposition of the body
 2. Location of personal effects
 3. Identification requirements / procedures
 4. Notifying officers' names, agency and telephone numbers
- d. To assess the survivor's or next-of-kin's physical and emotional well-being, the notifying officer should determine if the individual has reasonable control over his / her emotions and if support persons, such as close friends or family members, should be summoned. The officer should remain with the survivor or next-of-kin until other support persons arrive.
 - e. In the interim, officers should avoid attempts to provide comfort by using phrases such as, "I know how you feel" or "I know how hard this is for you."
 - f. Notifying officers should conduct a follow-up within 24 hours with any survivor when there is concern for the survivor's well-being.

361.4.5 DELIVERING NOTIFICATIONS FROM OTHER AGENCIES

Should any outside agency request assistance in delivering a death notification or other emergency message, sufficient information should be obtained to answer obvious questions which might be asked by the next-of-kin. The guidelines within this policy should be followed when making an outside agency notification.