



GENERAL ORDER

DURHAM POLICE DEPARTMENT
DURHAM, NC

NUMBER:

4027 R-3

DELIVERING EMERGENCY MESSAGES

Effective Date: 12/15/1995

Revision Dates: R-1 11/01/1998; R-2 01/10/2005; R-3 9/28/2020

INTRODUCTION

One of the most delicate and critical responsibilities of the Durham Police Department (DPD) is informing various individuals of the death or injury of family members. The DPD and its members are committed to carrying out this responsibility promptly and compassionately.

MESSAGES FROM INDIVIDUALS OR OTHER AGENCIES

When another agency requests that DPD deliver a message concerning a family emergency, Durham Emergency Communications Center (DECC) will obtain a telephone number and dispatch an officer to deliver the message with the number given for “a family emergency.” If there is a local number for the intended recipient, communications may try to make contact and provide the subject with the number to call for more information, in accordance with DECC protocols.

NOTIFICATION OF DEATH OR SERIOUS INJURY

Upon arrival at the scene, that involves a death or serious injury, the assigned officer will advise their supervisor of the situation. If an investigator is assigned, per General Order (G.O.) [4018 Preliminary/Follow-up Investigations](#), the lead investigator will coordinate the notification.

If a medical facility requests assistance locating next-of-kin, an officer or investigator should accommodate the request. If the next-of-kin’s contact number cannot be found, officers may need to respond to the person’s home or office to make the notification. Officers and investigators should refrain from giving graphic details about the circumstances of the incident. They should provide the family member or emergency contact with the medical facility’s location and offer transportation, if appropriate for the circumstances. If a next-of-kin identification is needed, the officer or lead investigator should provide transportation to and from the location where the identification will take place. In the event a support person is requested, the officer or lead investigator should honor this request, when possible.

In an apparent natural cause death (G.O. 4085 *Handling of Deceased Persons*), officers should ascertain whether or not the family is already at the scene. If the family is not on the scene, the supervisor or the lead investigator will arrange for the notification.

If the next-of-kin lives outside of the Durham area and cannot be located, the supervisor or lead investigator will decide whether to make the notification over the phone or request the corresponding agency to make the notification. When asking another agency to make a notification, the agency may be contacted directly or through the DECC.

For any case involving a member of the DPD, refer to the procedure in G.O. [2015 On the Job Injuries & Transitional Duty](#).

When making a notification for death or serious injury of a foreign national, the officer or lead investigator will notify the [consulate](#) via [fax](#), regardless of whether a next-of-kin notification has been made.

RELEASE OF INFORMATION TO THE MEDIA

Only Public Affairs Unit personnel, the executive officer to the Chief of Police, an incident commander, the Chief of Police or designee, or a member of the executive command staff shall release any information regarding serious injuries or death to the news media. Victim identification will not be released to the media until the victim's next-of-kin have been notified.

If the circumstances are such that a significant amount of media interest is likely, the lead investigator should reach out to the Public Affairs Unit if the family requests assistance with the media.

GUIDELINES FOR MAKING DEATH NOTIFICATIONS

It is preferred that death notifications be made in person. Whenever possible, a team of two officers/investigators should make death notifications. Personnel should identify themselves and present their department identification if they are not in uniform. Using the victim's name, the officer/investigator should confirm that the individuals they are speaking with are the victim's nearest next-of-kin. In most cases, parents or spouses should be the first ones notified before siblings or children. Never make a notification to a minor child under the age of 18.

What to Say

Next-of-kin should be informed simply and directly with warmth and compassion. Expressions like "expired," "passed away," or "we've lost" should not be utilized.

A better example is to say, "I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you (pause just a moment, you are "preparing and predicting"). "Name" has been involved in a serious vehicular accident/shooting, etc., and they have died. (Pause again) I'm so sorry." The "I'm sorry" is very important because it expresses feelings rather than facts and invites them to ventilate their personal reactions. Continue to use the words "dead" or "died" through the ongoing conversation.

Continue to use the victim's name, not "body," or "the deceased." Other appropriate statements include:

- I'm so sorry. (simple, direct, validating.)
- It's harder than most people think. (Validates, normalizes, encourages them to seek support.)
- Most people who have gone through this react similarly to you. (Validates and normalizes.)
- If I were in your situation, I'd feel very ___ too. (Validates, normalizes, assures.)

What Not to Say

Do not blame the victim in any way for what happened, even though they may have been fully or partially at fault. Questions should be answered honestly. Examples include:

Avoid discounting statements, such as:

- I know how you feel. (You don't.)

- Time heals all wounds. (It doesn't.)
- You will get over this. (They will get better, but they will never "get over it.")
- You must go on with your life. (They will the best way they can, and they don't need to be told.)
- They didn't know what hit them. (Unless you're sure.)
- You can always find someone worse off than yourself. (Not at the moment.)
- You must focus on your precious memories. (Not now.)
- It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. (They don't believe that now.)

Avoid statements that set unhealthy expectations, such as:

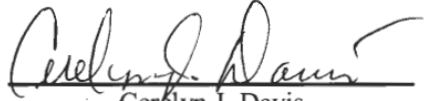
- You must be strong for your children/spouse/parents. (Not true.)
- You've got to get hold of yourself. (No reason.)

Avoid disempowering statement, such as:

- You don't need to know that.
- What you don't know won't hurt you.
- I can't tell you that. (If you can't, explain why and when survivors can expect to have the answer.)

While survivors may choose to use their own faith beliefs to comfort themselves, DPD members should not use religious platitudes and clichés. The following statements are examples that should be avoided:

- It must have been their time.
- Someday you'll understand why.
- It was actually a blessing because...
- God must have needed them more than you did.
- God never gives us more than we can handle.
- Only the good die young.


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