

DEATH NOTIFICATIONS

POLICY:

It is the policy of the Omaha Police Department (OPD) to contact survivors regarding the death of individuals in a timely manner and in the most compassionate, professional manner possible.

PROCEDURE:

I. Criminal Homicides

- A. The Homicide Unit is responsible for notifying immediate survivor(s) of criminal homicides.
- B. The Homicide Unit Detective(s) will determine whether a Uniform Patrol Bureau (UPB) officer will accompany them when notifying immediate survivor(s) of criminal homicides.

II. Natural Deaths, Suicides, and Traffic Fatalities

- A. In the event of a natural death or suicide, the original responding officer will make every attempt to notify the immediate survivor(s) and document those efforts.
- B. In the event of a traffic fatality, the Traffic Unit is responsible for notifying immediate survivor(s) and documenting those efforts.
- C. If the notifying officer is unable to notify the immediate survivor(s) or to identify the deceased party, the officer will contact the Criminal Investigations Bureau (CIB). After all exhaustive efforts have been made, the Douglas County Coroner will be notified, and will then be responsible for notifying the survivors.
- D. If requested, the Homicide Unit will assist the Douglas County Coroner in locating survivors and identifying the deceased.

III. Requested Notifications

- A. Death notifications requested by other jurisdictions or persons are the responsibility of an on-duty UPB sergeant, who will assign to a UPB officer.
 - 1. If an officer delivers an out-of-jurisdiction notification and there is not an associated OPD RB number, the officer who delivers the notification shall complete an Information Report with a new RB number to document the notification.
- B. OPD employees will follow the procedures outlined in the "[Emergency Messages](#)" policy when they receive a request from another agency or person to deliver a death notification.

IV. Recommended Notification Procedures

- A. Notification of survivors should be made in person by a UPB officer and, if possible, preferably with another person, such as a police chaplain, OPD co-responder, spiritual leader, or a close friend.
- B. Chaplains are available to assist with the delivery of death notifications.
 - 1. Chaplain assistance may be requested as described in the "[Chaplaincy Program](#)" policy.
- C. The following guidelines should be considered during the notification process:

1. Persons making notifications should each drive separate vehicles. This provides for the unknown. For example, an officer may rush a caretaker to the hospital, while the chaplain stays with children until someone else arrives.
2. Whenever the health of immediate survivors is a concern, emergency medical services employees will be requested to stand by. Officers should remember that shock is a medical emergency.
3. During notification, the survivor should be seated in the privacy of the home. If survivors are at work, officers will prearrange with their supervisor to talk in a private area.
4. Compassion should be used when making notifications. Survivors will remember the words of the notification for the rest of their lives.
5. Officers performing notifications should begin by stating, "I have some very bad news to tell you." This gives the survivor an important moment to prepare for the shock.
6. Family members should be informed slowly and the information regarding the incident should be made clear. The victim's name should be used during the notification. Officers will not refer to the victim as "the body."
7. Examples of proper notification statements include the following:
 - a. "Your daughter was in a car crash and she was killed."
 - b. "Your husband was shot today and he died."
 - c. "Your father had a heart attack at work and he died."
 - d. "I am sorry this happened."
8. The following types of statements should be avoided:
 - a. "Sally was lost."
 - b. "Your son passed away."
 - c. "It was God's will."
 - d. "She led a full life."
 - e. "I understand what you are going through."
9. All questions must be patiently answered. (Example: cause of death, location of deceased's body, how it will be released and transported to the funeral home, whether an autopsy will be performed, etc.)
 - a. When survivors ask a question that OPD officers cannot answer, officers will get back to the survivor when information is available.
10. Officers will offer to call a friend or family member who can come to support the survivor. Officers will stay with the survivor until the support person arrives.
11. Officers will inform the survivor of any chance to view the deceased's body.

12. Officers will arrange for immediate child-care needs if necessary. Child-care resources may include survivors' family, friends, or church.
 - a. If child-care is needed and the survivor does not have family members or friends with whom they are comfortable leaving their child, officers will contact the Child Special Victims Unit (CSVU) to arrange for child-care.
 13. Officers will drive the family to the hospital if necessary. If the family insists on driving, an officer or another person will accompany and/or follow them to the hospital.
- D. If a survivor cannot be located, officers will leave a message at their residence and/or place of business to request that they contact the appropriate on-duty UPB sergeant as soon as possible.
1. After the survivor has been located, the UPB sergeant will designate a UPB officer (and if possible another person, such as a police chaplain, OPD co-responder, spiritual leader, or close friend) to make arrangements to notify the survivor in person.
 2. The UPB sergeant shall designate a UPB officer who must notify the original caller of the circumstances.
- E. Officers will complete an OPD Supplementary Report (OPD Form 200A) to document their role in the notification, time of the notification, the survivor's name, date of birth, address, phone number, and other relevant details.

V. Death Messages Prior to Positive Identification

NOTE: Periodically, families will receive information that their loved one may be deceased prior to a positive identification. This can happen as a result of media coverage, social media, or notification by those who may have witnessed the incident. When this occurs, family members may show up at the hospital, investigation scene, or may contact the Department by phone **PRIOR** to a positive identification. Officers must consider the possibility of a misidentification prior to confirmation of a deceased individual.

- A. The supervisor in command of the investigation will be notified whenever they learn a family member has received information their family member may have died prior to a positive identification.
1. If the family member(s) arrives at the hospital, officers will work with hospital staff to identify a room for family members to gather.
 2. If at a homicide, crash scene, or accident site, family approaches and requests information about their loved one, officers will talk with the family member. At the very least, these conversations will be held in the privacy of a vehicle or away from other bystanders.
 3. In all cases, officers will take the time to tell the family appropriate information that will not compromise the status of the investigation. Officers will document why the family believes the deceased is their family member.
 - a. During this conversation, officers will advise the family they are attempting to make a positive identification as soon as possible and, if the information will not impact the criminal investigation, what complications may exist.
- B. Possible messages for family members of deceased person who is not yet positively identified may include the following:

1. Crash / Accident Victim: "The vehicle is registered to Sally Smith and a female about the age and description of Sally has died in the crash. However, we are not able to positively identify the female at this time and do not want to make a mistake. We know that when people die of traumatic injuries away from home, misidentification sometimes happens. This means you could be mourning the loss of your family member and another family will not know their loved one has died. We are working as quickly as possible to ensure you have accurate information through fingerprints (or whatever other identification means). Can I contact a police chaplain or contact a family friend or your spiritual advisor to sit with you while we go through this process? As soon as we know information, we will tell you."
 2. Homicide Victim: "Ms. Jones, I realize that John's friends have called you and told you that John was shot. We are investigating a homicide of a young man that possibly matches John's description. While it is possible that this is your son, we cannot say for certain until we receive the results of the fingerprints. We want to ensure whoever shot this young man is held accountable, so we need to complete a thorough investigation to ensure that happens. The first thing, is to positively identify this is, in fact your son, as sometimes witness statements are wrong or misleading. The second, is to gather any evidence that will be needed for prosecution. Can I contact a police chaplain, or a family friend, or your spiritual advisor to sit with you while we go through this process? As soon as we know information, we will tell you."
 3. Completed Suicide: "Mr. Frank, I realize the media has reported that a male was found hanging in the park and your son, Joe, was suicidal when you or his friends spoke with him last week. We know that when people die of traumatic injuries away from home, and especially after time has passed, misidentification can occur. This means you could be mourning the loss of your family member and another family may not know their loved one has died. We are working as quickly as possible to ensure you have accurate information (through fingerprints and/or other identification means such as scars, birthmarks, or tattoos). Can I contact a police chaplain, or a family friend, or your spiritual advisor to sit with you while we go through this process? As soon as we know information, we will tell you."
- C. If the body is badly decomposed or the injuries are so severe that fingerprint identification is impossible, whenever possible, it is important to be honest with the family about the challenges officers face with the identification process and what steps are being taken to provide a positive identification.

VI. Mistaken Identity Death Notifications

- A. If it is discovered that a Death Notification was made in error, officers shall immediately:
1. Confirm the true identity of the deceased.
 2. Notify their supervisor, who shall notify their full chain of command up to and including the Chief of Police.
 3. Notify the deceased's survivors.
 4. Notify the hospital, coroner, or any other relevant offices/persons who may have been given the previous, incorrect identity information.

NOTE: Notification of the hospital and other relevant offices is especially important so they can immediately work to correct their records.

REFERENCES:

I. Previous OPD Orders

- A. Previous General Orders: #23-03, 45-14, 7-21 and 16-23.

II. Accreditation Standards

- A. CALEA Accreditation standards 55.2.6 and 81.2.10 are relevant to this policy.

III. Other

- A. PPM Monthly Updates #7-2018.