



DEATH/ SERIOUS INJURY NOTIFICATION

✓ new: rescinds: amends:		cross-reference: accreditation standards: NYSLEAP Standard(s): 43.7
effective date: September 2020	amend date: March 2024	

I. PURPOSE

The purpose of this General Order is to ensure prompt notification of “next of kin” or “significant others” in all cases of death or serious injury that are handled by the Tompkins County Sheriff’s Office, and to establish and define office procedure in making such notifications.

II. PROCEDURES

Planning the in-person death notification

A. Every effort shall be made to locate and notify the next of kin and or significant other as soon as possible. beginning with spouse or domestic, and if necessary, followed by adult child, parent, adult sibling, and other relatives until an appropriate next of kin is identified.

B. Officers should gather and verify essential details surrounding the deceased or seriously injured. Positive identification of decedent must be made before conducting the in-person death notification to ensure there is not unnecessary trauma towards the affected next of kin and other who may be mistakenly contacted. For example, the officer should record such details as the:

- Deceased or seriously injured individuals full name,
- Age,
- Gender,
- Home address,
- Location of death/injury,
- Nature of death/injury,
- Time of death/injury,
- Location of body,

C. Enroute to the next of kin and/or significant other’s residence, the officer(s) should take the time to review these details.

D. Identify, when reasonably possible given time limitations, any special or unique circumstances

that may impact the delivery of the notification and affect the next of kin who will be receiving the notification. This may include ascertaining whether survivors are older adults, have a disability, visually impaired, hard of hearing, have medical concerns, and/or existence of language barriers.

- E. Do not release to the media or other outside resources the name of the decedent until the next of kin is notified. If media has already obtained information related to the death, they should be asked to withhold the information until after the notification has been completed.

Notification Team

- A. Two office members will comprise the notification team with at least one member experienced in delivering death notifications, when feasible and practicable. It is recommended that a close friend, clergy or neighbor accompany the team making a death notification if at all possible.
 - 1. One member will be the primary contact to deliver the notification.
 - 2. The second member will provide support and monitor the next of kin and surroundings.
- B. If the notification has to be made alone, the officer should offer to assist the next of kin in contacting a relative, close friend, etc.

Delivering the Death Notification

- A. All such notifications shall be made in person and not by telephone or written correspondence. If the party to be notified does not reside within the office's jurisdiction or within a reasonable distance, a request for the appropriate police agency to make such notification will be initiated.

Note: Notification by telephone may be done only under exigent circumstances and with approval from a supervisor.

- B. When you need to contact another agency outside your jurisdiction in order to perform the notification, provide them with all the pertinent details at your disposal including but not limited to:
 - 1. The full name, date of birth, and other identifiers of the decedent.
 - 2. The full name and address of the next of kin to be notified.
 - 3. A synopsis of the circumstances surrounding the decedent's death.
 - 4. The name, address, and telephone number of the location where the decedent is located.
 - 5. Contact information of the investigating officer and their police department.
 - 6. Request that they make the notification in person as quickly as possible and that you receive immediate verification thereafter that this has been accomplished.

- C. It is very important that the officer be permitted inside the house before actual notification is made.
 - 1. A death/serious injury notification conveys very personal and private information; this information should not be initially shared by others; nor should the next of kin/significant other's need for personal privacy be compromised at this traumatic moment.
 - 2. If notification is completed at the door, officers may not be able to gain admission thereafter. In this event, should the survivor suffer serious medical or psychological problems, the officer may not be able to assist.
- D. Extreme tact and a direct approach should be exercised by officers. Officers should deliver the notification in a gradual but direct manner. The pace of your delivery will be dictated by the actions of the survivor. The officer should speak in a slow, calm manner and proceed with the notification until completed.
- E. If the individual has died, relay that information. Never give the family a false sense of hope. Use words such as "died" rather than "gone away" or "passed away."
- F. Details regarding the cause of death, particularly in cases of violence, accidents, or murder, should not be discussed at this time. Using such words as decapitated or killed detracts from a competent and compassionate notification and is best left to a physician or medical examiner to discuss at a later time. Being too graphic at this stage can create an emotional overload which can complicate an already difficult situation.
- G. Officers should display an attitude of understanding and sympathy and express a desire to assist.

Post Notification

- A. Be prepared for unexpected responses from next of kin survivors such as fainting, hysteria, and possible verbal or physical assault. Additional assistance may be needed from victim assistance providers, emergency medical technicians, or others to help calm these situations.
- B. Let the next of kin show emotion allowing the next of kin sufficient time to regain composure following delivery of the notification.
- C. The next of kin may have questions; be sure to answer honestly and compassionately.
 - 1. If you don't know the answer – say so and offer to get back to them with the information.
 - 2. If you know that there are additional steps for the next of kin (e.g., identifying the decedent, law enforcement interview, etc.) then advise them.
- D. Inform the next of kin survivor of any chance to view the decedent's body and/or necessary visual identification. Arrangements for the viewing or visual identification of the decedent by next of kin may be made by the notification team.
- E. If necessary, assist the next of kin/ significant other by providing a ride to the hospital.

- F. If an autopsy is required, the notification team should be able to explain the reason and provide a general non-graphic explanation of the procedure.
- G. Do not leave the next of kin, especially a lone survivor, unattended, unless you are reasonably confident they have adequate personal control and/or support to take care of themselves and those whom they may be responsible for.
 - 1. Gauging the need for support/assistance shall include but not be limited to:
 - a. The emotional reaction and physical condition of the next of kin to include:
 - Awareness of the officer'(s) presence.
 - Grasp of the place, time, and reality of the death.
 - Progressive ability to express themselves is demonstrated.
 - b. The availability of a support system including friends, family, close neighbors, access to clergy, means of transportation, other adults in the home, etc.
 - c. Care for infants or small children, persons with disabilities, and older persons or the infirmed.
 - 2. Support can be established by:
 - a. Asking if you can call anyone for them such as relatives, friends, and clergy that can provide support and offer to wait for them to arrive.
 - b. Being prepared and willing to provide transportation for individuals to bring them to the next of kin.
- H. Leave name and contact information of notification team members for next of kin to call should any further questions arise.
- I. Provide information regarding the availability of services and programs available through the NYS Office of Victim Services if the incident prompting the death notification was a crime.

III. **SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A. Children

- 1. Death notifications shall not be made directly to a child unless the next of kin has requested a child should be present while a notification is being delivered.
- 2. Death notifications to a child should be delivered by a person the child trusts.
 - a. Members of the notification team can aid in delivering the notification to a child, if requested by the nest of kin.
 - b. If assistance is requested, use age-appropriate language while sitting at the same level as the child.

B. Persons with disabilities or older adults.

1. Notification team members should be familiar with general effective communication techniques when interacting with people with disabilities or older adults. For persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, be prepared to communicate via writing, speech (lip) reading or American Sign Language. It is the choice of the person as to what mode of communication should be utilized, not the officer.
2. If the person has an intellectual disability, the officer should use plain English/simple language. They may need to rephrase their statement.
3. Consider having a family member or support staff person who knows the individual well accompany the officer. Receive directions on how to best speak to the person and what the response may entail.

C. Language barriers

1. Utilize local language services if there is an existence of a language barrier that will impede the delivery of the notification.
2. Never use a child to translate the death notification to the next of kin.

D. Social media can pose a challenge to the death notification process as the next of kin could already be aware of their loved one's death. In this instance, it is important to explain to the family that it takes time to ensure accurate information is gathered before an official notification can be made.

E. Mass Casualty Events

1. Coordination in managing the death notifications among responding law enforcement agencies and the local coroner/medical examiner's office is essential and treated as a priority. Where multiple law enforcement agencies are involved, the lead agency in managing the death notification process must be clearly designated to include the responsibility of the establishment, implementation, and any necessary oversight of a Family Assistance Center.
2. Determination will be made with law enforcement partners if a private area within a family assistance center should be used to make the death notifications, where practicable.
3. Notifications should be done as quickly as possible following positive victim identification. Next of kin are frequently aware from social media, television coverage, and communications from survivors and witnesses that their loved ones are potential casualties.
 - a. When practicable, designate one notification team per family, with as many notification teams as necessary based on the circumstances.
 - b. If appropriate, make notifications on a rolling basis to each family as the identity

of each victim becomes verified rather than delivering the notifications only after all victims have been identified.

4. Once the notification is delivered, you may have to explain the investigative and identification process to the next of kin, particularly if it may result in a delay in releasing the body of the decedent. Make sure that the next of kin knows where to obtain follow-up information on when and how the decedent will be released.
5. Alert next of kin that there may be a press conference or other public release of information by authorities and that the family may want to think through how to respond to or avoid press inquiries whether by phone, electronic communication or at their homes.

F. Workplace/business notifications

1. Locate the next of kin's manager or supervisor upon arrival at the workplace/business requesting to meet with the employee regarding a family emergency. Do not divulge additional information.
2. Request the manager or supervisor to provide a private room.
3. Follow best practices procedures outlined in this policy for delivering an in-person death notification.
4. Offer to notify the manager or supervisor regarding the notification, if preferred by next of kin. Allow the next of kin to determine what information is to be shared with their manager or supervisor.

G. Criminal investigations

1. If there is an ongoing criminal investigation it is important to explain to the family members that they may be contacted to assist with the investigation.
2. When the subject or perpetrator is deceased, the same process applies when making the death notification.
3. It is suggested practice to use separate notification teams for the victim and perpetrator for death notifications. For example, a murder suicide situation or DWI crash where the drunk driver and the victim are both deceased.
4. As in any notification, avoid adding personal opinions during the notification especially if the victim and perpetrator are from the same family.

IV. **REQUESTS FROM OTHER AGENCIES**

- A. When requested by another agency to make notification, the officer should obtain whatever pertinent information is available about the situation in order to assist the next of kin/significant other in receiving the message.

- B. Prior to making the notification, the information must be authenticated. The officer should obtain the agency and caller's telephone number to verify the legitimacy of the request.
- C. Officers delivering the notification shall tell the next of kin/ significant other the source of information and who to contact for further assistance.

V. **TRAINING**

- A. Law enforcement personnel who are assigned responsibilities associated with delivering an in-person death notification to next of kin will receive training on the procedures to do so prior to conducting a notification. Officers will receive periodic retraining thereafter.
- B. Initial training on delivering in-person death notifications will be conducted during the field training program. Training will include office procedures on the following areas to include but not be limited to:
 - 1. Planning the in-person death notification.
 - 2. Identification of the decedent.
 - 3. Collection of accurate information regarding the decedent.
 - 4. Identification of the decedent's next of kin.
 - 5. Assembling death notification team.
 - 6. . Preparing for delivery of in-person death notification.
 - 7. Delivering the in-person death notification.
 - 8. Conducting post notification; and
 - 9. Addressing special circumstances

Attachments:

- A. *OVS Crime Victim Brochure 2023*
- B. *Pocket Guide FINAL Death Notification PSU*

By Order Of



Derek Osborne
Sheriff