

Effective Delivery of Death Notifications

Trainer Guide

April 2024

Overview

Circumstances involving unexpected death often require law enforcement personnel to notify individuals affected by the death. Notifications may be required in both criminal (e.g., homicide, vehicular manslaughter) and non-criminal (e.g., accidental drug overdose, suicide) death investigations and may include communication with the following:

- Co-victim – an individual who has lost a loved one to homicide, including family members, other relatives, and friends of the decedent¹
- Next of Kin – one or more persons in the nearest degree of relationship to another person; denotes a person’s legal status to receive information related to criminal and medicolegal investigations and authorize transfer of the decedent’s body for final arrangements²
- Point of Contact – an individual identified by the deceased prior to death, next of kin, co-victims, survivors, or law enforcement as the designated contact for communication³
- Survivor – a person who has survived an ordeal or trauma; includes both direct and indirect victims of crime. The term survivor emphasizes the strength and courage needed to survive a traumatic event.⁴

It is important to note that terminology may vary by jurisdiction and profession. Individuals may also encompass more than one role. For example, an adult male may be the next of kin and be identified by several other co-victims as the point of contact for communication with law enforcement.

The news of a death notification is often shocking, so being prepared to deliver it without causing further harm is essential.⁵ Training material in this guide helps standardize practices to ensure affected individuals are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect; notified of their rights (when applicable); provided with case updates; and given the information and referrals they need to address the often-traumatic impact of victimization.

Target Audience

All training material in this guide is designed for law enforcement personnel who have assigned responsibilities connected to death notifications. This may include patrol personnel, investigators, supervisors, and law enforcement-based victim services personnel.⁶

¹ Definition used in [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services \(LEV\)](#) publications, produced by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

² [Next of kin Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#); definition used in [Communicating With Individuals Impacted by Cold Case Violent Crimes: Strategies for Ongoing Engagement](#), produced by RTI International.

³ Definition used in [Communicating With Individuals Impacted by Cold Case Violent Crimes: Strategies for Ongoing Engagement](#), produced by RTI International.

⁴ Definition used in [OVC Model Standards](#), produced by the Office for Victims of Crime.

⁵ [CVR Research Syntheses_Homicide Covictims_Report.pdf](#)

⁶ Definition used in [Law Enforcement-Based Victim Services \(LEV\)](#) publications, produced by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Law enforcement-based victim services – personnel who are employed by a law enforcement agency to serve victims, witnesses, survivors, and co-victims of crime within the jurisdiction. These personnel are subject to rigorous background check processes and training, receive access to the agency’s record management system (RMS) and Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS), and represent the law enforcement agency.

Training Approach

Training material referenced in this guide is based on the following principles of adult learning:⁷

- Training material focuses on building skills rather than just transferring information.
- Participants are involved in meaningful activities to practice new skills.
- Participants are encouraged to apply their knowledge and experience to the training.
- Trainers connect learning with real-world applications.
- Training material is relevant to the assigned roles and responsibilities of participants.

These principles are based on the idea that adult learners learn best when

- They are determined, motivated, and want to learn.
- The material is catered to their level of understanding.
- There is a relationship to an individual goal and the lesson.
- They see their progress.

Training material in this guide includes methods that appeal to visual learners (those who learn best by seeing or reading), auditory learners (those who learn best by hearing), and kinesthetic learners (those who learn best by engaging in activities).

Training Goals

Training material in this guide is based on the following training goals:

- Formal agency policies that guide agency personnel in their assigned responsibilities will be reinforced through training.
- Training will foster high-quality service provision (coordinated, collaborative, culturally responsive, multidisciplinary, and trauma-informed) for those served.
- Training will prepare agency personnel to effectively advocate for the rights and needs of those served regardless of the outcomes of investigative processes.
- Referrals and supportive handoffs to other services providers with identified roles (e.g., Victim Compensation personnel, grief support providers) and expertise will be encouraged through training.

Trainer Requirements

Identified trainers should

- Have experience conducting interactive learning and practical experience delivering death notifications.
- Be thoroughly familiar with all training material.
- Draw on professional knowledge and experience, encourage participant contributions, moderate group discussions, and convey clear expectations to enrich the training.

⁷ For additional information on adult learning, visit Western Governors University's [10 Simple Principles of Adult Learning](#) or the National Center on Elder Abuse's [Adult Learning Principles](#).

Suggested Preparation for and Use of Training Material

Trainers should review and adapt all material to align with statutes, policies, and practices within their jurisdiction and agency. Material should also be adapted to include local information and resources.

Recommended equipment and materials for this training include:

- laptop (with PowerPoint installed) and internet connectivity
- projector and screen
- presenter biographies
- copies of training material

Training material components include:

- **PowerPoint Template** – The slide deck includes trainer notes, references to source information, and suggested handouts.
- **Handouts** – The recommended handouts support the training content and ongoing learning after the training.
- **Activity Worksheets** – The activity worksheets guide the application of the training content in practice scenarios. Training participants assigned to small groups complete worksheet prompts related to one of the following scenarios:
 - Bystander Scenario
 - Homicide / Suicide Scenario
 - Vehicular Manslaughter Scenario
- **Training Evaluation Template** – The training evaluation template provides a method to obtain participant feedback.

Acknowledgment

All training material may be reprinted and adapted. Any materials reprinted or adapted should be accompanied by the following acknowledgement:

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