

**POLICE DEATH NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES  
AND SURVIVAL FAMILY SUPPORT**

Detroit Police School of Staff and Command  
Death Notifications

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1998, twenty-one (21) police officers have died active on the Detroit Police Department, five (5) in the line of duty. Volume IV, Chapter 6, Section 3, 4 and 5 of the Detroit Police Manual outlines death and critical injury notification procedures for the Detroit Police Department. Writer questions whether death notifications, being one of the of the most difficult tasks faced by members of the Detroit Police Department, are being done in a sensitive, caring manner and whether sufficient support is being provided to the officer's survivors.

According to Mrs. Laurie A. Erickson, there seems to be some dispute concerning appropriate death notification and survivor support by the Detroit Police Department and many other police and public safety agencies throughout the state of Michigan and across the United States. Mrs. Erickson's husband, Byron J. Erickson, was a Michigan State Trooper who died in the line of duty on July 31, 1993. Since that time, Mrs. Erickson has dedicated herself to aiding police officer and firefighters' survivors during their bereavement and healing periods as well as to provide guidance and direction to police agencies regarding their involvement and responsibilities to the survivors.

In this paper, writer will discuss the current death and critical injury notifications of the Detroit Police Department, including what support services and benefits are provided to the family. In addition to interviewing Mrs. Erickson and possibly some other survivors, a survey will be conducted to examine the procedures of other police agencies regarding in and outside of Michigan. From this information, writer will make recommendations that might change or improve the delicate topic and task of death critical injury notification for the Detroit Police Department.

## **INTRODUCTION**

How does the Detroit Police Department handle death notifications? Is it done in a caring manner? What additional support does the police department provide to the surviving family members? Is that support sufficient? If you have never had to make a death notification to family survivors on behalf of a police officer, or God forbid, been the recipient of such a notification, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to answer most of these questions. Of course anyone could read the department guidelines, if they exist, on what to do and how to do it. But, how do you feel the impact of the dry mouth, the lump in your throat, or nausea in your stomach that suddenly appears at the sight of the surviving spouse or child opening the front door of their residence? Do you go inside, blurt it out, say you are sorry and leave? How do you handle the crying, screaming, anger and despondency that sometimes follow? The purpose of this paper is to discuss how death notification is actually done, how it should be done, to what extent a police agency should assist the family, and possibly to motivate changes in the Detroit Police Department's death notification procedures where needed. The methodology of analysis will include reference articles and some interviews with known Detroit Police executives who gave statements under the color of anonymity.

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Mrs. Laurie A. Erickson lost her husband, Michigan State Trooper Bryon J. Erickson, in July of 1993, when a motorist struck him while he was conducting a traffic stop on a Michigan highway. The emotional trauma led Mrs. Erickson to not only devote her time to aiding the grieving survivors of police officers and firefighters who died in the line of duty, but she also furthered her formal education in psychological counseling

and conducted extensive research on the death notification policies of various police and public safety agencies and compiled a comprehensive list of benefits that are available to surviving families from city, state and federal agencies.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Through her research, Mrs. Erickson discovered the Detroit Police Department and many other police and public safety agencies throughout Michigan and across the United States are lacking in appropriate death notification procedures. Many do not have any written procedures and many do not follow the procedures that are in place. Her findings are confirmed by the United States Department of Justice in its National Institute of Justice "Research in Brief" document, which cites, "a staggering 67 percent of law enforcement agencies surveyed lacked formal policies concerning the death of an officer." The brief further revealed that departments are lacking guidelines for continued emotional support for the survivors beyond the days of the visitation and funeral. It is Mrs. Erickson's opinion and her experience that a department's failure to provide continued support for the surviving family gives the family the impression they have been totally abandoned. The lack of continued support she believes is based upon a common myth that the surviving family will get over the tragedy and simply move on with their lives; that a grieving individual will just put the tragedy behind them as part of their personal history. Nothing could be further from the truth. Mrs. Erickson reports that what the department and co-workers do not seem to understand is the family and loved ones suffer and grieve every time an anniversary occurs, such as a wedding, a baptism, a child's birthday, the anniversary of the deceased officer's death, the deceased

member's birthday, and certainly on holidays that generally bring families together such as Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas, Father's Day and Mother's Day.

Another myth within the law enforcement community, according to Mrs. Erickson, is that the type of death that befalls an officer, whether a deliberate felony or accidental, somehow coincides with the level of grief and pain experienced by the surviving family. However, her studies revealed that whether an officer dies accidentally, off-duty or feloniously on-duty, it does not impact a family's grief any greater or less than the other. All deaths she states are devastating to the loved ones left behind, regardless of the circumstances.

Mrs. Erickson also emphasizes the way in which a death notification is delivered and questions that are left unanswered can add several years of additional grief to the survivor's pain and suffering. The department and co-workers must select their words carefully and be cognizant of attitudes, hidden nuances and body language that indicate to the loved ones the officer somehow was at fault or screwed up.

The Detroit Police Department General Procedures Manual devotes seven pages of guidelines to death and critical injury notifications and procedures, three of which solely describe the funeral escort, procession and procedures. Volume IV, Chapter 6, Section 3.1, reads in part, "In cases of death or serious injury to a member of the department while on duty, a ranking member of the command to which the member is assigned shall notify the Homicide Section and the Notification and Control Section. At the direction of the member's commanding officer, notification of the family shall be made, in person, by a ranking member attached to the command to which the member is assigned, and a by a chaplain from the Chaplain Corps. . . . An active or retired member

shall be entitled to have department members as pallbearers and motorcycle escorts as well as department assistance in arranging the funeral, provided that the funeral is held within the city or its adjacent suburbs.” The steps taken for off-duty deaths are described in virtually the same manner when the family is not aware of the death or injury of a member, except the funeral procedures slightly differ. Death and serious injury notification procedures for civilians and Police Reserve officers are addressed similarly.

Section 5 of this same chapter addresses “Assistance to Families of Deceased Members,” which states, “The Secretary-Treasurer of the Detroit Police Benefit and Protective Association will assist and advise the families of active members who die in the line of duty, or otherwise. This assistance and advice will include the following areas:

- a. Aid in filing insurance claims;
- b. Aid in filing for benefits from the retirement system;
- c. Advising on social security benefits, if applicable;
- d. Aid in filing for any other benefits due from the City of Detroit
- e. Advising and securing assistance in legal matters through the department’s legal advisors wherever proper and appropriate;
- f. Coordinating contact with the Hundred Club in the event death occurred in the line of duty; and
- g. Other related matters.

A ranking member assigned to the deceased member’s command shall advise the family of this service.”

Section 8 ends the chapter with “Federal Benefits for Injury or Death of Non-Federal Law Enforcement Officers,” which basically states, “Members who are injured, sustain a disease or are killed while engaged in apprehending federal crime offenders, fugitives or protecting material witnesses of a federal crime are eligible for benefits under FECA (Federal Employees Compensation Act).” However, the injured member or the member’s survivors must initiate these claims and the appropriate claim form must be obtained from the Personnel Services Section.

The following survey questions were sent to various Detroit Police Department executives to determine practical application of the department’s death notification procedures and asked for their input and personal views: (1) Have you had to make a death notification for a deceased officer? (2) How did you feel? (3) How did the family react? Be specific. (4) How did you feel about the family’s reaction? (5) Did you provide any assistance for the family? Describe. (6) Did you do any follow up with the family after the funeral? (7) What changes would you make in the Department’s death notification procedures, if any?

One precinct executive responded to the corresponding questions in the following manner:

“(1) Yes. (2) Reluctant and remorseful for reasons unknown at the time. (3) You can imagine! They were crushed, devastated, in disbelief and pain. They were hollering, shouting and crying. Thank goodness for the Chaplains and their assistance. (4) I was in pain and in near tears just seeing and feeling what was occurring before me. (5) Yes, I provided the family with twenty-four hour coverage from the time of the incident until three days after the burial. (6) Yes, we continued to stay in contact with the families and

include them in special events occurring in the precinct for their possible participation. (7) Not much of anything! The Chaplain Corp has been literally a Godsend. They provided prayer and support for me and the family. They made my experience easier and added dignity and respect.”

Another police executive responded with the following: “(1) No, I was never personally involved with a death notification for a deceased police officer. I did work homicide for a short while and made death notifications to families. I imagine that some of those feelings that I had were the same but would be greatly enhanced when it involved someone I knew and worked with. However, when I was a sergeant at (...), I closely observed a (death) notification and later contact with the family of one of our officers. The officer was well liked and the family responded enthusiastically to what they described as the officer’s ‘police family.’ During the time before the funeral services, an officer from the deceased officer’s shift (one of his partners) was assigned by the command to stay with the family – drive them around and do whatever they could to ease the situation. The family responded very appreciatively to this. The family which was large and extended – maintained contact with various officers of the unit after the funeral services. One serious negative developed during this process – the officer’s shift supervisor who was one of the driving forces to ensure contact with the family and assisting them as much as possible – developed a ‘personal’ relationship with the deceased officer’s widow. Although I never got the impression that the family was aware of this situation, the shift officers were highly offended at what they took to be a ‘playa’ taking advantage of the situation. This situation occurred approximately (...) years ago

but the resentment by the officers against this supervisor (now a highly ranked command officer) continues.”

Another department division commander responded telephonically that he had never had to make the actual death notification, but he had been present when the families were told of the tragedy. He recalled three of those occasions, the first of which he took especially hard because the officer worked under his command and was around the age of his own son. The officer’s parents lived a great distance from the city of Detroit and the notifying members told them their son had been seriously injured and was in the hospital. The injured officer had, in fact, died prior to the notification, but, due to the long drive, the commanding officer (not the interviewee) felt it was better not to tell the parents until they arrived at the hospital. The conveying officers did as they had been directed to do. The commanding officer and a department chaplain subsequently handled the death notification at the hospital. The division commander recalled one negative occurrence, which concerned a second officer who had been seriously injured in this same incident. The injured officer’s family expressed that they were not being treated with the same regard as the family of the officer who had died.

He iterated the other two occasions of death notification also took place at the hospital, one where the officer was placed on life support and then removed from it a few days later and the other where death had also occurred prior to his conveyance to the hospital. The death notifications, he stated, were generally handled at the hospital because the Emergency Medical Service team would not pronounce death at the scene.

The Office of the Secretary-Treasurer of the Police Benefit and Protective Association provided a booklet entitled, “Summary Plan Description for members of the

Detroit Police Benefit & Protective Association (7/1/92),” outlining the life insurance benefits covered by the Association. A member of the support staff, Ms. Julie Hemele, was interviewed relative to the Association’s role in providing assistance to surviving families of deceased officers. Ms. Hemele was only aware that the Secretary-Treasurer sometimes escorted the family to different locations such as the Pension Board and Social Security Office (if applicable) to learn what benefits were available to them. The Secretary-Treasurer did not respond to any of writer’s inquiries.

Another booklet obtained from Mrs. Erickson’s research was published by the Kent County Sheriff Department of Michigan. This department, based out of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has 157 sworn deputies covering a population of 500,631 citizens. The 13-page General Order directed to its membership establishes death notification procedures that will “ensure the proper support and emotional care for survivors following a line-of-duty death.” The order contains a 3½-page Line-of-Duty Death Information form to be completed by the deputy and his family to be used in the event of death or serious injury. The form details all critical family information, funeral information, notification information, insurance information and any special requests or directions the member would want to have followed in either event of his or her death or serious injury. An excerpt from the General Order reads as follows:

“It is the policy of the Kent County Sheriff Department to provide liaison assistance to the immediate survivors of any member who dies in the line of duty. The Sheriff may institute certain parts of this general order for cases of an officer’s serious injury or natural death. The Kent County Sheriff Department will provide a clarification

and comprehensive study of survivor benefits as well as other tangible and intangible emotional support during this traumatic period of readjustment for the surviving family.

Coordination of events following the line-of-duty death of a police officer is an extremely important and complex responsibility. Professionalism and compassion must be exhibited at all times as an obligation to the officer's survivors and to the law enforcement community. In order to provide the best possible services and support for the officer's family, specific tasks may be assigned to selected members of the Department. Their titles are: Notification Officer, Hospital Liaison Officer, Family Liaison Officer, Department Liaison Officer and Benefits Officer." The order then details the specific tasks for each position and the manner in which they should administer these tasks: "NOTIFICATION OFFICER: It shall be the responsibility of the Shift Supervisor to properly notify the next of kin of an officer who has suffered severe injuries or died. The shift Supervisor may personally make the notification or designate a NOTIFICATION OFFICER to inform the survivors." The responsibilities of the Notification Officer also include the following:

- Never release the name of the deceased officer before the immediate family is notified.
- If there is knowledge of a medical problem with an immediate survivor, medical personnel should be available to coincide with the death notification.
- Notification must always be made in person accompanied by either the Sheriff or a representative, close friend, or another police survivor could appropriately accompany the Notification Officer. However, if the aforementioned persons are not readily accessible, notification should not be delayed until these people can

- gather. The family should learn of the death from the Department FIRST and not from the media or other sources.
- Never make a death notification on the doorstep. Ask to be admitted into the house. Inform family members slowly and clearly of the information that you have. If specifics of the incident are known, the Notification Officer should relay as much information as possible to the family, making sure to use the officer's name.
  - Family members should be transported to the hospital (if requested) by police vehicle. If the family insists on driving, an officer should accompany them in the family vehicle.
  - The Notification Officer must arrange for child-sitting needs for young children which may involve co-workers' spouses, transportation of children to a relative's home, or similar arrangements.
  - The Notification Officer should notify the hospital staff and the HOSPITAL LIAISON, prior to departure from the residence (by telephone if possible) that the family is en route.
  - If immediate survivors live a significant distance beyond the Department's jurisdiction, the Notification Officer will ensure that the Communication Center sends a LEIN (Law Enforcement Information Network) message to the appropriate jurisdiction requesting a PERSONAL notification. The Notification Officer may choose to call the other jurisdiction by telephone in addition to the LEIN message. Arrangements should be made to permit simultaneous telephone contact between the survivors and the Department. Due to the external

monitoring of police frequencies, communications regarding notifications should be restricted to the telephone whenever possible. If the media somehow obtained the officer's name, they should be advised to withhold the information, pending notification of next of kin.

- The Notification Officer should remain at the hospital while the family is present.

The Sheriff or a high-ranking representative should respond to the residence or the hospital to meet with the family, as quickly as possible.

The first Supervisor or Command person, other than the Sheriff or his/her representative, to arrive at the hospital becomes the HOSPITAL LIAISON. The HOSPITAL LIAISON Officer has the following responsibilities:

- Coordinating the activities of hospital personnel, the officer's family, police officers, the media and others.
- Arrange with hospital personnel to provide an appropriate waiting facility for the family, the Sheriff, the Notification Officer, and only those officers requested by the immediate survivors.
- Arrange a separate area for the fellow police officers and friends to assemble and establish a media staging area.
- Ensure the medical personnel relay pertinent information regarding the officer's condition to the family on a timely basis and before such information is released to others.
- Notify the appropriate hospital personnel that all medical bills relating to the injured or deceased officer be directed to the County of Kent, workers compensation insurance carrier, or the Department. The family should not

receive any bills at their residence. This may require the HOSPITAL LIAISON to re-contact the hospital during normal business hours to ensure that proper billing takes place.

- Ensure the family is updated regarding the incident and the officer's condition upon arrival at the hospital.

With approval of the family, the Sheriff will assign a FAMILY LIAISON Officer.

The selection of a Family Liaison Officer is a critical assignment and should be assigned to someone who enjoyed a close relationship with the officer and his family. The role of the Family Liaison Officer is a 'facilitator' between the family and the Department. The responsibilities of the Family Liaison Officer include:

- Ensuring that the needs of the family come before the wishes of the Department.
- Assisting the family in funeral arrangements and make them aware of what the Department can offer if they decide to have a police funeral.
- Apprising the family of information concerning the death and the continued investigation.
- Providing as much assistance as possible, including overseeing travel and lodging arrangements for out-of-town family members, arranging for food for the family, and meeting child care and transportation needs.
- Being constantly available to the family and available at all times via pager for the family and the Department.
- Notifying Michigan Concerns of Police Survivors (M.C.O.P.S.), a group available to provide emotional support to surviving families.

- The Family Liaison Officer acts as a long-term liaison ensuring close contact is maintained between the Department and the survivors and that their needs are met for as long as they feel the need for support. If no court proceeding surround the circumstances of the officer's death, the Family Liaison Officer will relay all details of the incident to the family at the earliest convenience. If criminal violations surround the death, the Family Liaison will: Inform the family of all new developments prior to press release; keep the family apprised of legal and parole proceedings; introduce the family to victim assistance specialists of the court; encourage the family to attend the trial and accompany them whenever possible; and arrange for investigators to meet the family at the earliest opportunity following the trial to answer all their questions.

The Sheriff will also designate a DEPARTMENT LIAISON Officer and a BENEFITS COORDINATOR. The Department Liaison Officer has the following responsibilities:

- Working closely with the Family Liaison Officer to ensure the needs of the family are fulfilled.
- Handle the news media through the ordeal. If the family decides to accept an interview, screen those questions presented to the family so as not to jeopardize subsequent legal proceedings.
- Meet with the following persons to coordinate funeral activities and establish an itinerary: Sheriff and Commanders, Funeral Director, family priest or minister, Cemetery Director, and Honor Guard.

- Direct the funeral activities of the department and visiting police Departments according to the wishes of the family.
- Issue a LEIN message to include all pertinent information on the officer, the funeral arrangements and the uniform to be worn.
- Coordinate all funeral activities to including: expressions of sympathy in lieu of flowers, obtain an American flag, assigning members as ushers, arrange for a stand-by doctor for the family if necessary, coordinating traffic management with other jurisdiction if necessary, maintain roster of all departments sending personnel to the funeral; ensuring the surviving parents are afforded recognition and that proper placement is arranged for them during the funeral and procession.
- Acknowledge the visiting and assisting departments and assigning an officer to remain at the family home during the viewing and funeral.
- Arranging routine residence checks by the Patrol Division or appropriate jurisdiction of the survivor's home for 6 to 8 weeks following the funeral.

The BENEFITS COORDINATOR is responsible for:

- Filing Worker's compensation claims and related paperwork, assisting the family in filing claims under the Public Safety Officers Benefits Act, if appropriate.
- Contacting the appropriate County Officers without delay to ensure that the beneficiary receives death and retirement benefits, the officers remaining paychecks and payment for remaining annual vacation, sick time and any other benefits provided under the officers labor agreement.
- Gathering information on all benefits/funeral payments that are available to the family and setting up special trust funds or educational funds.

- Notifying police organizations such as Fraternal Order of Police and labor unions of the death and to ensure that any and all entitlements are paid to the beneficiaries.
- Preparing a printout of the various benefits/funeral payments that are due to the family, listing named beneficiaries, contacts at various benefits offices, and when they can expect to receive payment.
- Meeting with the surviving family a few days after the funeral to discuss the benefits they will receive and providing them with a copy of the prepared printout and any other related paperwork.
- Meeting with the family again in about six months to make sure they are receiving benefits.

The responsibility for “Continued Support of the Family” then rests with the all the members of the Kent County Sheriff Department and reads in part, “Members of the Department must remain sensitive to the needs of the survivors long after the officer’s death. The grief process has no timetable and survivors may develop a complicated grief process. More than half of the surviving spouses can be expected to develop a post-traumatic stress reaction to the tragedy. Survivors should continue to feel a part of the ‘police family’. They should be invited to Department activities to ensure continued contact. Members of the Department are encouraged to keep in touch with the family. Close friends, co-workers and officials should arrange with the family to visit the home from time to time so long as the family expresses a desire to have these contacts continue. The Sheriff should observe the officer’s death with a short note to the family and/or flowers to the gravesite. Holidays may be especially difficult for the family, particularly

if small children are involved. Increased contact with the survivors and additional support is important at these times.” The order also addresses a Critical Incident Debriefing that is made available for any police members who may have been emotionally affected by the death or serious injury of another member.

The Norman Oklahoma Police Department also publishes a comprehensive Line-of-Duty Death Policy (April 1991), inclusive of its death notification procedures, but there is less emphasis on compassion than with Kent County. The Norman Police Department policy establishes the Norman Emergency Services Support Team (N.E.S.S.T.) as well as an Emergency Room Liaison (ERL) to make personal contact and assist in all areas of support and benefits to the surviving family. The Norman Police Department, also stresses, like Kent County Sheriffs, if N.E.S.S.T. is not readily available, death notification should not be held up and if there is an opportunity to get the family to the hospital prior to the officer’s demise, waiting for the proper delegation to gather shall not be adhered to. Further, if the officer has already died, never give the family a false sense of hope, but relay that information using words like ‘died’ or ‘dead’ rather than ‘gone away’ or ‘passed way.’ Following the funeral services, the Norman Police Department policy provides as well for N.E.S.S.T. to do routine residence checks on the survivor’s home for six to eight weeks after the tragedy and to check with the surviving family every six months to ensure they are receiving every possible benefit, as they should.

In 1995, the Attorney General Office of Iowa published its Recommended Procedures for Death Notification, “*In Person, In Time.*” This booklet addresses the “Principles of death notification: In person, in time, in pairs, in plain language and with

compassion.” This is an additional product of Mrs. Erickson’s research efforts: “**In Person,**” means to (1) always make death notification in person—not by telephone; (2) arrange notification in person even if the survivor lives far away; (3) never take death information over the police radio. “**In Time,**” means to (1) provide notification as soon as possible—but be absolutely sure, first that there is positive identification of the victim; and (2) before the notification, move quickly to gather information, i.e. obtain as much detail as possible about the circumstances of the death, determine the next of kin, find out about the health considerations concerning the survivors to be notified, and whether other people are likely to be present at the notification. “**In Pairs,**” means (1) always try to have two people present to make notification; (2) take separate vehicles if possible—one might need to aid a survivor in shock while the other notifier assist other survivors; (3) plan the notification procedure—the notifying team should decide who will speak, what will be said and how much can be said. “**In Plain Language,**” means (1) notifiers should clearly identify themselves, present their credentials and ask to come in; (2) relate the message directly and in plain language—survivors are served best by telling them directly what happened; and (3) inform the survivors of the death, speaking slowly and carefully giving details that are available. Then calmly answer questions the survivors may have. “**With Compassion,**” means (1) remember your presence and compassion are the most important resources you bring to death notification; (2) accept the survivors emotions and your own; (3) plan to take time to provide information, support and direction--never simply notify and leave; and (4) offer to call a friend or family member who will come support the survivor; stay until the support person arrives.

The unique quality about the “In Person, In Time” publication is that it addresses death notification procedures in the work place and in a hospital setting, as well as providing a Community Resource Information sheet for the notifiers to complete, ensuring all the necessary steps and notifications are made, which is then left with the survivors for later reference.

The state of Michigan issues a document of the Death Benefits (July, 1996) from different state entities, but notification procedures are not inclusive of this information.

### **PROCEDURES**

This project started out with a lecture by Mrs. Laurie Erickson to Staff and Command Class 13. At that time, Mrs. Erickson offered to provide any assistance relative to her topic of death notification. It was her research that uncovered the wide spread lack of death notification procedures by law enforcement agencies across this nation. It was interesting to learn that many of the surviving families were less than content with the treatment they received after the funeral of their loved one.

The question of death notification was then posed to various command officers within the Detroit Police Department, many of who had never made a death notification, but were in attendance to the majority of officers’ funerals from Detroit and other police agencies in this state. Nine command officers were questioned and three responded with interviews. The others declined to respond to e-mail and telephonic interviews possibly for fear that anonymity would not be maintained or for reasons unknown to this writer.

Various city governments and police websites were searched for death notifications, survivor benefits and police procedures. The New York City government provided a four-page report on Survivor Benefits under Section H, not specific to police

but to city employees in general. Other cities such as Chicago, Seattle, Houston, Dallas and Los Angeles provided only generic information on police recruiting, local mission statements and current events within their municipalities. A fax survey was forwarded to the following police agencies for comparison study, but no responses were received over a period of about six weeks: Chicago Police Department (60605), population of 2,994,100 and 13,400 officers; Dallas Police Department (75201), population of 1,030,150 and 2,841 police officers; Denver Police Department, population of 1,000,000 and 1,439 police officers; Houston Police Department, population of 1,734,335 and 4,905 police officers; Los Angeles Police Department, population of 3,501,487 and 9,324 police officers; and the Seattle Police Department, population of 534,700 and 1,262 police officers. Follow-up inquiries to Mrs. Erickson through her E-mail and the Thin Blue Line were unresponsive as well, except for their website page which only tells about their organization.

## **RESULTS**

It is evident that Kent County Sheriff Department and the Norman Police Department are handling death notifications and survivor support with greatest amount of dignity and sensitivity any agency can muster. Nearly every detail from the notification phase to continued survivor support phase has been included in a clear, comprehensive written document for use by their members. For anyone who has never had to handle a death or serious injury notifications, their manuals lead them through it step by step.

A comprehensive death notification policy such as the one in place for Kent County would have deterred the negative response described by the Detroit Command Officer from the family that felt they were treated less favorably than the other family. It

is difficult to determine whether the other incident of the supervisor becoming personally involved with the surviving spouse could have been prevented, but the involvement of other designated members in the whole process may have prevented some of the opportunities the supervisor had to meet alone with the widow. The issue is, however, whether the Detroit Police Department needs to rethink its death notification and survivor support policies. The short answer is “Yes.” More importantly, written policies must be in place and made known to its membership so that fewer mistakes are made where death notifications and survivor support is concerned.

### **DISCUSSION**

Contrary to the limited information gathered through this research, the topic of death notification remains a vital area that should be regarded more openly by all public service entities, such as police and fire. The Kent County Sheriff Department provides a comprehensive and detailed explanation to its members on death notifications, treatment and support of the survivors, support to the officers, and specific task assignments to cover every possible contingency. It was clear, specific and sensitively written. The Detroit Police Department’s General Order only briefly described who would conduct the death notification with the remainder of the order addressing funeral procedures. Nothing was discussed with regards to a survivor support system in the General Order. The Detroit Police Command Officers who did respond did in fact allude to an informal survivor support system that occurs with the death or critical injury of an officer. The twenty-one deaths (five in the line of duty) indicate that some form of death notification procedures are in place, including a functional support system for the surviving families. This system is, however, only based on the level of compassion and commitment of the

Command Officer and other Detroit Police Officers who may have been close to that officer. One unique positive point about the Detroit Police Department that was not included or mentioned by the other agencies was the use of Department Chaplains. The Chaplains come from a variety of religious backgrounds and are experienced in comforting people who are going through difficult circumstances.

The Detroit Police Benefit and Protective Association handles mostly what Kent County described in the responsibilities of a Benefits Coordinator. The responsibilities attached to the other four positions are pretty much left to the discretion of the Commanding Officer of where the officer was assigned at the time of death or injury.

The Norman Oklahoma Police Department, like Kent County, has been careful to establish humane procedures for death notification and a survivor support system. Possibly there are other comprehensive death notification and survivor plans in place for other police agencies that should be researched to determine the best practices. Death notification is such a traumatic event that most agencies would prefer to avoid the topic altogether, which might account for the lack of responses.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The death of an officer, employee, or family member is one of the most traumatic experiences a person can encounter. Nobody likes to imagine dealing with the death of a loved one. Unfortunately, it is highly likely that most people will have to face this situation at some point in their lives. On top of all the grieving, there are many things that need to be taken care of immediately after a death, but that need to be handled with a clear mind. That is where the support of the 'police family' is most important. Not only should the Detroit Police Department take the time to put a comprehensive written death

notification and survivor support policy in place, but any public service entity that does not have such procedures for death notifications and survivor support, should create one for its employees. Extreme care and caution should be employed with handling such delicate situations. The work has already been done by agencies such as Kent County Sheriff Department and the Norman Police Department. The Detroit Police Department needs only to incorporate it, in writing, into the police manual.

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