Death Notification:
Delivering the News with Compassion

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Death Notification:
Delivering the News
With Compassion for the Bereaved
And Concern for the Messenger
Overview of this Seminar

What’s in it for ME?

- **Enhanced awareness of the emotional hazards of crisis work**
- **Exploring essential needs of the bereaved**
- **Strategies for compassionate and thorough death notification**
Death Fact 1

About 330 people are murdered each week in the United States.

Source: FBI, 2017
About 769 people are killed in vehicular crashes each week.

Death Fact 2

National Safety Council, 2017
The Oklahoma City bombing killed 163, and that terrorist attack was unquestionably a national crisis.

Yet, impaired drivers kill 46 more people than that every week in this country!
In 2016, the number of deaths from suicide surpassed the number of deaths from motor vehicle crashes in the United States. (44,965)
Death notification is:

- Stressful
- Emotionally draining
Who Should Notify?

Historically,

the Coroner,

Medical Examiner

or Justice Of The Peace

was REQUIRED to Notify.
What qualities should the Notifier possess?
Stress and the Notifier
Spencer Eth

- Chief of Clinical Services, Los Angeles VA Medical Center Mental Health Clinic

- 67% of detectives studied reported that Death Notification was a very difficult or extremely stressful component of their work
Apprehensions About Death Notification

- Feeling untrained or unprepared
- Over – identification with the bereaved family
- Personal vulnerability
- Fear of being labeled by colleagues
What should the attitude be when notifying of a death?

A positive belief that you may complete a difficult task in the best manner possible.
Key Factors in Recovery

(Lannint, J. 1987)

- Expression of appreciation
- Meaningful debriefings
- Certain personal characteristics
Delta 191 crash study

- Helps us learn about PTSD among crisis workers. Also known as “shell shock”
- Aug. 1985/Dallas, Texas
- 136 deaths/27 survivors
- 77 first responders studied 20 mo. after crash/Ave. experience=14 years
Delta 191 crash study

- Findings that have implications for development of stress management plans
- Being able to treat the bodies with respect, especially prior to death, helped in adjustment
- Those who stepped on bodies or had to put body parts in bags had most difficult recovery
Delta 191 crash study

- After 20 months, 16% were still having “intrusive recollections” of the crash numerous times during the week, for many of them, daily
- Most intrusive recollections were in LEO’s, followed by paramedics
- 30% were still experiencing PTSD at time of study. Half still experienced numbing
Expressions of appreciation

The ones with the greatest problems after 20 months had received *no* expression of appreciation from anyone—media, agencies or families.
Meaningful Debriefings

- Supervisors should explain reason for debriefing
- Initial debriefing should be mandatory
- Held on work premises
- Information about PTSD should be given—let them know they are not going crazy
- Small, informal, confidential groups
- Professional facilitators from outside if necessary
Personal Characteristics

- Easy going personality/sense of humor
- Adequate training and continuing education
- Personal spiritual or religious beliefs
- Opportunity to train others or speak publicly
- Desire to help people
Is it mostly a good world or a bad world out there?
SAFETY

Do you do things differently now, because of your professional experiences?
How do you view most criminally-charged defendants?
Coping Strategies

- Identify Schemas
- Get Support
- Process Personal Issues
- Seek Balance to Offset Stress
- Identify Positive Components of Your Work
- Utilize Humor (In Safe Places)
September 13, 1899     New York City

Car driver, Arthur Smith, ran into 68 year old real estate agent Henry Bliss as he stepped off a streetcar at Central Park West and 74th Street.

Bliss died at Roosevelt hospital. Smith was arrested and released after placing a $1,000 bond.
The Aftermath of Homicide

- Grief and mourning last longer
- Grief—the pain, emotional and physical reactions to the loss
- Mourning—how we express it and work through it
Unique Features of Homicide

- Unanticipated
- Violent
- Senseless
- Legal Process
- Relationship Impact
- Financial Complications
- Intensity of Emotions
- Employment Considerations
- Faith/Philosophy of Life Changes
Kentucky School Bus Crash:
The Deadliest Alcohol-Related Crash in American History
24 youths and 3 adults killed
34 survived with injuries

Church bus with 67 people inside was struck by a vehicle, driven in the wrong direction on a Kentucky interstate, causing it to burst into flames.
My husband and I came upon the crash scene that morning as we were looking for Sean. The image that will live with me for the rest of my life is that of the sheet covering his body and our being restrained from going to him. I still do not remember driving home. --Diane Holmes
Practices for the Proper Death Notification

✓ Be Absolutely Certain Of Identity Of The Deceased

Use More Than One Source Of ID

Do Not Take Belongings
Practices for the Proper Death Notification

☑ Be Prepared for Medical Assistance Needs
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ **GO**, Don’t Call On The Phone
   Notify As Soon As Possible
   If Next Of Kin Is Not Local…
   If Family Is Not Home…
   If Next Of Kin Is At Work…
   If Phone Call Is Only Alternative…
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Take Someone With You
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Talk About Your Reactions to the Death Along The Way
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Present Credentials And Ask To Enter

Don’t Deliver News Through Door
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Be Sure You Have Next Of Kin
   Ask Them To Sit Down. Sit Down.
   Don’t Use a Child for the Notification
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Inform Simply And Directly With Warmth And Compassion

Use the word “Dead” or “Died”
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Don’t Discount Feelings, Theirs Or Yours
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Join Survivors In Grief Without Being Overwhelmed By It
✓ Disempowering Statements
✓ God Clichés
Survivor Needs During the Notification

- Ventilation of Emotions
- Calm, Reassuring Authority
- Restoration of Control
- Preparation and Prediction
Should We Allow The Family To See The Body?

... And If So, **When**?
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Answer **ALL** Questions *Honestly*

✓ **Offer To Make Calls**
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Talk To Media **ONLY** After Discussion With Family
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Don’t Leave Bereaved Alone
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✓ Give Written Information
  Your Contact Information
  Location of Loved One
  Crimes Compensation
Practices for Proper Death Notification

☑ If Body Identification Is Necessary, Transport To and From
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✔ Debrief With Confidant
Practices for Proper Death Notification

✔ Next Day, Call And Ask To Visit Again

✔ Let The Survivor Know You Care
How May We Help?

- Crime Report
- Medical Autopsy Report
- Photos and Videos
Viewing Photos with Survivors

- Primarily handled by victim advocates
- Survivor usually accompanied by close friend, pastor, counselor
- Each photo should be placed in a large envelope or separated with a sheet of paper between each photo
- Least offensive picture on top—most offensive on bottom
Viewing Photos with Survivors

- Support person describes each photo before showing
- Based on this information, SURVIVOR decides whether or not to look at photo
Cultural Diversity

- Does your community have many ethnic groups?
- Do you or someone in your agency have training on how to handle an encounter with people who speak a different language than you?
- How will your notification be received?
Spiritual diversity

- Different beliefs/religions handle death differently
  - What is your local knowledge and understanding of specific faith communities?
- Best practice: have a spiritual leader of their faith (if known) go with you
SUMMARY

In Time,

In Person,

In Pairs,

In Simple Language

With Compassion
Thank You!

Each and every one of you!

And for your dedication to serve newly bereaved people of this community with compassion, respect and dignity.

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