

## Frequently Asked Questions

Commonly asked questions by the NOK during a death notification:

- Who died and how was the decedent identified?
- What happened?
- Where did the death occur?
- When did the death occur?
- Where is my loved one now?
- May I see him/her?
- What is an autopsy and why is it necessary?

Lord, J. & Stewart, A. (2008). *I'll never forget those words. A practical guide to death notification.* Burnsville, NC: Compassion Books, Inc.

## ✓ Helpful Delivery Statements

- I am so sorry.
- This is harder than most people think.
- Most people who have gone through this react similarly to you.
- People can experience many different feelings at the same time.
- This is one of the most difficult times in your life.

## ✗ Statements to Avoid

- I know how you feel. (**You don't**)
- Time heals all wounds. (**It doesn't**)
- You need to be strong. (**They don't**)
- You'll get over this someday. (**They won't**)
- He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- You must go on with your life.
- You will find closure.
- He didn't know what hit him.
- It's best to remember him the way he was.
- You don't need to know that.
- You don't want to see him/her.
- It must have been his/her time.
- Think of all of your memories.
- Religious phrases

For further information please visit:

[www.deathnotification.psu.edu](http://www.deathnotification.psu.edu)



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U.S. Department of Justice  
Federal Bureau of Investigation



# WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU...

*Guide for professionals delivering death notifications with professionalism, dignity, and compassion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Families want and deserve the truth about their loved one's death. Every death notification has a lasting impact on family members. The manner in which a death notification is provided can positively or negatively affect family members. It can significantly affect the family's cooperation with any investigation. While delivering a death notification can be an extremely stressful experience for all

individuals involved, there are methods to ensure the notification is provided to family members with professionalism, dignity, and compassion.

There are four key elements to providing a death notification. They are **planning**, **preparation**, **delivery**, and **follow up**.



## 1 PLANNING

- Identify the deceased. Be prepared to explain the preliminary identification.
- Set up the death notification team.
  - ▶ *Who will be in the lead role and who will be in the support role?*
- Identify and verify the legal Next-Of-Kin (NOK) to be notified.
- Know details of when, where, and how the death occurred.
- Be prepared to provide accurate details regarding the death, assuming specific details can be released.
- Ensure that the *Coping with Grief* brochure is available.

## 2 PREPARATION

- Familiarize yourself with the death notification protocols within your jurisdiction.
- Know the process in your jurisdiction for the NOK to view their loved one.
- Check with dispatch for any medical concerns or safety issues at the NOK's location.
  - ▶ *If a concern exists, request ambulance support near the residence (not in front of) in the event it is necessary.*
- Prepare for physical and emotional reactions of the NOK.

## 3 DELIVERY

- Confirm the identity of the person with whom you are speaking and their relationship to the decedent.
- Introduce yourself, present credentials, and provide a business card with contact information.
- Ask to come inside and ask/encourage family member(s) to sit down.
- Provide a one-sentence statement to prepare the family for the notification (i.e. "I'm sorry to have to share this information").
- Use decedent's name. Do not refer to "your son's body," "your mother's remains," or "the corpse."
- Provide notification immediately following the preparation statement, using clearly understood words such as died, death, or dead. Do not use phrases such as passed on, lost, or expired.
- Provide the NOK with details of when, where, and how the death occurred.
- Provide the NOK with the current location of their loved one and the process to make arrangements to see and/or recover their loved one. This includes the autopsy process.
- Answer all questions honestly. Provide only information you know to be true and that you can release.

## 4 FOLLOW UP

- Ask if there are other family members who should receive official notification.
- Do not leave the NOK alone. Ask if you can call anyone for them and wait until the person(s) arrives.
- Ask if you can follow up within 24 hours.
- Provide written material whenever possible, to include the autopsy process, if applicable.
- Contact the NOK at the agreed-upon time. Ensure you follow through on the promise to contact them.
- Utilize this as an opportunity for the NOK to ask additional questions.
- Be prepared to discuss decedent's personal effects.
- Provide guidance for family members about speaking to the media, if requested.
- Answer questions about the release of their loved one to a funeral home of their choosing.
- Provide additional resources.