

# Bearers of Bad News Work 'Iffy' Area

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Times graphic by Larry Anderson and Gus Keller

## Bearers of Bad News Work 'Iffy' Area Policies, Training Virtually Nonexistent for Notifying Kin

*"I don't think there is a proven method of notifying someone that a loved one is dead. I don't care what kind of preparation you've had, that is a very personal thing, a very sensitive thing and it's different every time."*

—Orange County coroner's deputy.

The implication is that you can't develop a formal training program on how to handle death notifications. And while that may or may not be correct the implication is reflected throughout Orange County. Few agencies even mention the subject in their departmental manuals.

At the two police academies in Orange County the same holds true. Of the 11-week program conducted at Golden West College, perhaps 15 minutes is spent on the subject.

At the Orange County Sheriff's Training Academy, the last man to teach "Duties of the Coroner," under which the subject is supposed to be covered, said: "They give us two hours for our whole program. That's not enough time. You can't even touch on it (death notification). It just hasn't gotten the proper attention at anytime."

With rare exceptions, the same is true throughout California and, for that matter, the nation, according to the few people who are currently studying the matter.

"We don't have anything in writing on it," said a spokesman for the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office.

"We have no written policy," said a spokesman for the San Diego County Coroner's Office.

The San Diego spokesman, Supervising Dep. Coroner Max Murphy added: "This is something that is best learned by experience. And each deputy adopts a pattern that is most successful for him . . ."

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So, like home remedies for gout, procedures for death notification are more or less handed down from generation to generation.

And whether they are handed down in a sensible fashion depends on the wisdom, sensitivity and humaneness of the various people doing the handing down. Which can be iffy.

Why the handling of death notifications is

such an imperfect science is simple.

No one, including the Coroner's Office, is actually responsible for making death notifications. There is nothing written in law regarding such responsibility — for that matter, how one should go about doing it.

Policemen, sheriff's deputies and coroner's deputies agree that, given the chance, most of them will slough off this task to anybody they can.

It is the one assignment that includes guaranteed trauma.

"And it's just death itself," said one coroner's deputy. "Nobody wants to deal with it. Or talk about it. It's too morbid. Drags them down. It's something that everybody wants to put out of his mind. He doesn't want to think about it — in any form."

And so the sloughing. Mostly by policemen and sheriff's deputies. The problem with this is that sometimes the buck-passing process winds up with somebody really getting hurt or worse.

The biggest dodge is the telephone. And it is also the one way of doing the job that shows no regard for the condition of the person receiving the call.

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# Death Notifiers Operate in Void

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Orange County Dep. Coroner Tom Walezak attests to this fact: "This has happened to us many times when we have asked police departments to assist us with notifications, both inside and outside the county.

"They take the easy route out. They can't see fit to really tell the person. They just say, 'there's been an accident and would you call this number?' And they'll write down our number and maybe one of our names.

"I had a situation recently where a young person drowned in Orange County but lived in Los Angeles County. We called the police department in the jurisdiction he resided in and asked them to make the notification.

"The police department found nobody home, learned from neighbors where the mother worked, and called there. When they said they had a message for so-and-so, she said, 'Well, I'm so-and-so. What's the message?'"

"First they gave her our telephone number and my name, which she wrote down. Then they told her, on the phone, that her son was dead.

"The woman went screaming out of the office. In 10 minutes or so the office manager called me and jumped all over me because he found my name and number on her desk and thought I'd told her.

"It was pretty difficult for me — and for the woman — to be notified that way. Because one thing you cannot predict is what the reaction will be. In her case, she simply went to pieces."

Reactions can be devastating. And this is why the coroner's deputies are told to never make traumatic, close-knit notifications over the telephone. And this is the policy, written or not, of most police and sheriff's departments.

Just how devastating a badly delivered death message can be is documented by Dr. William Lamers Jr., a Kentfield, Calif. psychiatrist who has focused his work in the area of death notification and, for those who are terminally ill, death preparation.

Dr. Lamers cited one example, a patient of his who 10 years ago was notified by phone from a police department that his father had jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge.

"The boy was 15 years old. Nobody else was home. I know this is a non-psychological term — but he went bananas.

"Today, a decade later, he still suffers outrage, anger and frustration at the police for giving him that message over the telephone.

"By focusing on the notification itself

and remaining angry about that ever since, he avoided doing his grief work, a process that is necessary. It left him as he is today — depressed, unproductive and still focusing a lot of attention on the way he was notified of his father's death.

"So," said Lamers, "there can definitely be a long-term bad effect from a poorly handled death message delivery. Getting that across to law enforcement agencies is a matter that needs positive action."

Because there are few written procedures, almost no study on the subject and no laws stipulating in what manner various agencies are to handle death notification, Lamers' suggestion is difficult to act upon.

Some police departments avoid the matter entirely. The Newport Beach Police Department, according to Sgt. Tony Villa, will not make death notifications.

"We do not do that. That's the coroner's job," he said. "We don't want to get involved in it. If an agency from another state calls, we refer them to the coroner. If a relative from out of state calls, we will contact the person and give them the relative's number. But we won't give them the message. That's our policy. It's that simple."

Other police departments are less emphatic about it being "the coroner's job." They know it isn't. If the person killed and the person to be notified are within their jurisdiction, most police departments will make personal notification.

But if the death is out of state, some departments think that makes a difference. And, without telling the person to be notified what has happened, they will give him the out-of-state agency's phone number and simply say he has been requested to call that number.

For those police agencies with a policy of making death notifications, it generally is, as stated earlier, an unwritten one. In fact, of the more than 20 police departments in Orange County, only three have any type of written policy.

So it really is, according to Robert A. Johnson, coordinator of the police recruit academy at Golden West College, "a hit-and-miss proposition."

This is illustrated by comparing individual department policies.

According to Lt. Tom Patton of the Huntington Beach Police Department, one agency that does have death notification mentioned in its manual:

"We get the background on what happened and send an officer. He will try to find a neighbor or relative first,

then, accompanied by them, make the notification and stand by until not needed.

"If no one is home but there is a neighbor present who knows the person, we tell the neighbor to call us when the person arrives and we will then send out another officer to make the notification.

"If there is no one home, and if there is no neighbor, we leave a note at the residence asking them to call the watch commander. And the notification is made over the phone. This is very hard, very cold. You don't know what to say. We talk to them, try to help them over the phone. If the situation is bad we'll send a car there.

"You just tell them — and keep your fingers crossed."

In Santa Ana, where there is no written policy, the same general procedures are followed, according to Police Lt. H.C. Davis — except if nobody is home. If nobody is home, he said, and if it is a relative calling in the death message, the officers leave a note advising the resident to call the relative.

If it is not a relative, but another agency, Santa Ana's police is to wait until the person returns home and make the notification at his residence.

(According to Santa Ana Police Lt. Joe Weatherly, the city has just received and implemented a federal grant to train a "para-professional emergency response team," whose responsibilities will include death notification. In training now, the two-person team will begin full-time duties Aug. 1. However, Weatherly explained, the grant provides only for the two-person team, whose members will be working the same shift. Officers on other shifts will continue to bear the responsibility themselves.)

There are several police departments in Orange County that take total responsibility for death notification.

According to Sgt. Bill Lentini of Yorba Linda's Police Department, "We never make it by phone or note.

"We send two officers and before they go we check the register, phone book and cross-index to try and find a relative to take with us. If we can find a clergyman, we will. Or a neighbor.

"Each officer also has a listing of all social services and we take that with us. And if there's anything in it that can be of help, we will make, or help them make, contact with that agency. If there are children, we dispatch a female officer to care for them.

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# Bearerers of Bad News Rely on Instincts

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"Most of our officers really have an identity with the community, and while giving a death notification is like handing someone the ultimate denial, we feel the responsibility to do it."

The Laguna Beach Police Department police is the same. Unwritten but understood. "Death messages are always delivered in person by a policeman," said a spokesman. "If somebody's not home, we'll leave a note on the door asking them to please call the Police Department for an emergency message.

"When they call, if it's a death notification, we roll a car to deliver it."

But most police departments have not honed this matter down. Most leave notes. Most declare, "It's the coroner's job."

Police departments that admit to one or both of these practices — and you can be reasonably certain there are others — include San Clemente, Costa Mesa, La Habra, La Palma, Newport Beach, Seal Beach and Westminster.

The Orange County Coroner's Office argues the responsibility issue. At least, some deputies do.

One said it was better for the local police departments or Sheriff's Department to make the notification, "Mainly because when a person is notified, he might need medication. And a local police department is best able to handle that, because they know who to call and they have direct contact with their station by radio."

The response to that from another coroner's deputy: "That's bull. First of all, the policeman is no more going to know what kind of medication is needed than we would. A doctor determines that. Secondly, we have radios too.

"As for notification, while I'd rather not do it, we are the most qualified and it is probably best, in my mind, that we here do it. We have the experience. And we can recognize the sensitivity of it better than other people."

It might be pointed out that the Orange County Coroner's Office also has had no written policy itself on death notification.

According to Chief Dep. Coroner Jim Beisner, who has been concerned about this matter for some time, a procedural document on the subject is being drafted. But the approach to death notification is pretty much left up to the individual deputy. And styles differ.

One deputy says once you have entered the home you should take the persons to be notified into the living room. "There, if they fall down, they won't hurt themselves," he said.

Then, he said, you tell them: "You just say, I'm sorry, but I have to inform you that your husband is deceased. And then, rather than keep talking, you let that sink in."

Another deputy says that once you have entered the home, "You don't say, let's sit down. You just go over and sit down. But you don't sit in a chair. You sit on the couch. And you try and have them sit beside you.

"Then you tell them, Mrs. Jones, Ralph was in an accident and he died on the way to the hospital. And you don't pause. You never give them an opportunity to ask any questions until you've got everything out of your mouth that you have to say. You keep talking if you can. Where was he

going? Where had he been? What was his medical condition? You try and get what you need as fast as you can while they are rational. Because once it soaks in and they break down, you're never going to get any answers."

The individual deputies all agree that the most important matter is for the person to understand the other person is dead. But they go about that in different ways.

One believes the word "deceased" gets the point across better. Another says that while he might use that word, he prefers to say, "They're gone." Or, "They couldn't be saved."

"Others, and this was a point made by a number of policemen as well, word it in such a way that the person to be notified asks if the other person is dead.

"I attempt to have the person tell me their relative is dead," said one coroner's deputy. "I approach the person and state that I'm an investigator with the county and confirm who they are. Then I will ask them if there is anyone with them, because there has been an accident involving whoever it is.

"And they'll inquire as to what happened. And I'll describe it, say, as an automobile accident. And that the victims were taken to the hospital.

"And usually they'll ask me, 'How are they? Are they dead?' And I'll explain to them that attempts were made to save the person but they were to no avail.

"I've found this is an easier approach."

Others will ask the uniformed policeman (coroner's deputies wear plain clothes and always try to have a uniformed law officer accompany them to deliver the message.)

"He's identified by his uniform," said one. "He asks if we may speak to them he will say that I'm a coroner's investigator and if they have any questions that I can help them with. . . ."

Some of the deputies carry ammonia inhalers in case the person being notified (or, for that matter, the deputy himself) starts to faint.

Some, after the notification is made, suggest to the person that he have drink or two, if there's any in the house, to settle him down.

When the person notified asks to view the body (and it has been well documented that some people will never believe someone they love is dead until they actually see the body), some deputies will aid them in doing this.

When some deputies see a person is broken up but fighting the impulse to cry, they will gently encourage him to cry.

Some, when they see a person is in fragile mental condition, will remove any weapons from the residence until the situation has stabilized.

Because Orange County does not have a central morgue, private mortuaries are utilized on a revolving basis. Generally people do not know that the body of their loved one need not be handled by the morgue it was sent to. Some coroner's deputies will point this out, saying:

"Call the mortuary of your choice, tell them your husband is at this particular mortuary and have them contact the mortuary. You need not call the mortuary where we sent him." (The reasoning behind this, according to one deputy, is that some mortuaries not only charge more than

others but will actually hard-sell the bereaved to keep the body there.)

And some coroner's deputies simply ask the person if he would like the mortuary to call him the next day or if he would like to call the mortuary himself.

But some do none of these things.

About the only thing all coroner's deputies agree on is that steps should be made in advance to have a relative, friend or neighbor present when notification is made.

(There isn't any of this differentiation in the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office because deputies there do not make death notifications.

"Our policy," said a spokesman, is to let the police department, or whatever law enforcement agency that has jurisdiction in the area of the county, do it.

"(It is not supposed to be done on the phone. They are to do it in person. And then, after the notification has been made by them, we have them tell the person being notified to call us for details.

"(It's as simple as that . . ."

(In Los Angeles County, most death notifications, obviously fall upon the shoulders of police officers in the various cities and Sheriff's deputies.

(A spokesman at the Los Angeles Police Academy said it is in "the manual" that notifications must be made in person by the officer. But, he added, the manual goes little beyond that. And academy recruits hear little on the subject: "Fifteen to 30 minutes," was one estimate at the academy.

(However, it was learned that the subject has been given more attention by LAPD than would be indicated in the manual or the academy training. In fact, according to one spokesman, a 20-minute television cassette dealing with death notification is currently being shown to all LAPD officers.

"(What happened," said the spokesman, "is that apparently we were getting calls from citizens complaining about some of the ways they received their notification. And it became a priority that we study the matter and try to work up some systematic procedures of what to do and what not to do.")

There is actually only one agency in Orange County that has by-the-book guidelines on death notifications and which, in every case, follows those guidelines to the letter.

That agency is the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro.

As a rule, the commanding officer of the victim will make the notification to the family in conjunction with a chaplain. If the commanding officer isn't able to do so, the base's casualty assistance officer will, in the company of a chaplain. Or, if it is after duty hours, the chaplain will be accompanied by the officer of the day.

The message (if it is a marine who has died) is simple "On behalf of the commandant, the personnel of the Marine Corps, I regret to inform you that your husband has given his life in service of his country."

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# ABSENCE OF POLICIES

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But, according to Chaplain Robert Black, the officer usually will never get those words out of his mouth: "The people in the military are a little bit different than the civilian world because they, for one thing, are a little better prepared for this. Even in peacetime, an air station has crashes. At Camp Pendleton they are killed in training exercises. So the people on the base see it happening, and anytime they see an officer in dress blues with a chaplain coming up their steps — right away they know something's wrong."

The people on the base have something else going for them as well, the chaplain said. "The neighbors are on the porch before you finish your call and they stick together and help."

The Marine Corps casualty assistance officer helps, too, taking care of everything from funeral arrangements to benefits. And the care extends for 12 months, if needed.

But in the civilian world, matters are different. Many people do not have a friend or family nearby. And there's no agency set up to care for them and their needs once death takes someone away. They have to depend upon themselves.

So just the basic matter of how a person is notified of a death can be most significant. Of the men who make such notifications, most agree that certain procedural steps should be followed. But not much is being done about it, as far as setting up a uniform program is concerned.

Thus, the area is largely unexplored. Robert A. Johnson, coordinator of Golden West College's Police Recruit Academy, agrees with psychiatrist William Lamers that "this is an area which could, if improperly handled, affect a person's life."

"I think there should be some guidelines established by the state, by the attorney general," he said.

"And legislation could be developed to put the hat on the coroner or the local police — but at least show that there has to be some jurisdictional responsibility.

"And perhaps the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training could take a look at their basic police training revision course they are just now getting under way and perhaps include objectives to be obtained through police officer training in the area of death notification."

—JIM STINGLEY