

Planning Considerations for a Line-of-Duty Death

The Foundation has compiled elements from several plans that address line-of-duty death procedures. These sample elements reflect how various departments have prepared to deal with the tragedy of a line-of-duty death. These are by no means the only things that can be done. These elements can help you establish the basis for a plan for your department.

Basic Plan Elements

Sample Elements from Existing Department Plans

1. Policy

A. It will be the responsibility of (*department name*) to provide assistance to immediate survivors

OR

B. This plan recognizes that the goal of (*department name*) is to help people and provide assistance at every opportunity. This includes assisting the department's fire service family, especially when a member suffers a serious injury or dies in the line of duty.

2. Purpose

A. The purpose of this policy is to direct (*department name*) to provide proper care for the deceased firefighter's family. The FAMILY should make all decisions regarding funeral arrangements, with their wishes taking precedence over those of the department.

OR

B. The purpose of this policy is to offer assistance to all members of the department's fire service family after a line-of-duty death. This policy will help the department prepare for and respond to circumstances in a professional and compassionate manner.

3. Definitions

A. Line-of-duty death: A death which is the direct result of taking any reasonable or emergency response action that an active firefighter is authorized or obligated to perform.

B. Survivors: Immediate family members including: spouses; all children, including legally-adopted children; parents; siblings; and significant others.

C. Benefits: Financial payments, scholarships, tax benefits, and special programs available to the immediate next-of-kin of the fallen firefighter.

You may want to add other definitions based on the specificity of the plan.

Procedural Components

1. Establishing a Family Support Team

2. Notifying Survivors

Sample Statements

The department's Family Support Team will be responsible for necessary functions before, during, and after the funeral. The Chief will activate the team as needed. Members of the team will handle the following responsibilities, based on department resources:

1. Liaison between the team and the chief
2. Overall coordination of the team
3. Benefits coordination; only one department member should be authorized to work with the family on death benefits
4. Transportation and lodging coordination for out-of-town family members
5. Media coordination to release information about the incident, arrange media coverage of the funeral or memorial service, and provide privacy to the family
6. Hospital liaison to relay information between medical personnel and the family
7. Funeral or memorial service coordination including services and burial arrangements, traffic, honor guard, etc.
8. Family liaison to provide personal support for the immediate family, usually at the home. Personal support includes duties such as screening calls and visits, providing local transportation, assisting with burial arrangements, etc.

The department will establish a notification policy for survivors of fallen firefighters. This will include the following elements:

1. Getting all department members to provide emergency contact information and updating the information annually. This will allow members to name a member of the department who should be part of the notification team
2. Designating senior department personnel, and backups, who will make the notification
3. Notifying immediate family members in person before release of any information to anyone else. If members live out of the area, make arrangements for in-person notification by the local department
4. Having two members of the department make the notification. **Don't** hold up notification if the designated department members are not readily available.

Procedural Components

3. Notifying Members of the Department

4. Notifying Others

Sample Statements

5. If needed, driving family members to the hospital in a department vehicle and getting them to the proper area. If the family wants to drive their own car, have a member of the department accompany them.

Once the family has been notified, members of the department should learn of the incident from the department before it hears about it through the media. The department will establish procedures to ensure this notification, including:

1. Notifying all on- and off-duty chiefs
2. Notifying all chaplains
3. Preparing a short summary of known facts about the incident and the deceased and critically injured for the Chief and all other spokespersons to use
4. Working with the personnel officer, to confirm the basic information about the firefighter(s), including:
 - Correct spelling of name
 - Age
 - Next of kin
5. Preparing a memo to all members of the department that includes confirmed information
6. Establishing procedures to notify off-duty members
7. Keeping all members informed of funeral arrangements and memorial services

Other members of the community need to be notified after the family and the members of the department. Each community will need to tailor this list to its unique circumstances. However, the plan should include the following elements:

1. Making sure a short summary of known facts about the incident and the deceased and critically injured is available for the Chief and all other spokespersons to use.
2. Establishing a priority checklist of whom to call that includes name and title, office and home contact information, etc.

For example:

1. Elected officials
2. Employee Association official
3. Safety Officer

4. Public Safety Officers' Benefits staff
5. Fire service organizations

Procedural Components

5. Working with the Media

Sample Statements

The department should take steps to ensure notification of the family before giving any information to the media. Procedures to follow include:

1. Giving no personal information out to the media, even if they are on the scene, until confirmation of family notification has occurred
2. Using the basic information gathered on the incident and the deceased and/or critically injured. (Refer to Notifying the Department)
3. Preparing and clearing a written statement for the Chief to deliver or release
4. Setting up a media briefing, either at the hospital or other location
5. Designating a department backup to handle coverage of the incident if it is still ongoing so primary PIO can concentrate on handling information on the fatality

6. Dealing with the Hospital

The critically-injured firefighter will be transported to a local hospital. The department will establish procedures to deal with local hospitals. This will include the following elements:

1. Meeting with hospital officials to discuss appropriate waiting areas for family, coworkers, and the media should a line-of-duty death occur
2. Ensuring that the hospital information liaison has access to medical personnel to obtain information and access for the family and to provide approved information to the media coordinator
3. Having a member of the department available to the family at all times
4. Assigning a member of the department to ensure collection of the deceased's personal property
5. Arranging transportation for the family back to their residence

If the critically-injured firefighter must be transported to a medical center out of the local area, the department will establish procedures to assist the family in that location. These include:

1. Helping arrange transportation for the firefighter and the family, as required

Procedural Components

Sample Statements

7. Assisting the Family Before and During the Funeral

The department will ensure that the family's wishes come first. To assist the family before and during the funeral, the department will establish procedures, including:

1. Meeting with the family to explain what support the department can offer
2. Giving the family a pager number where a fire service liaison can be reached at any time
3. Providing information on different options for funeral arrangements, including a full honors fire service funeral
4. If the family chooses to have a fire service funeral, working with them on details
5. If the family chooses to have a private service, working with them as requested
6. Requesting local law enforcement officials to make routine checks on the family's residence for several weeks
7. Assisting with household responsibilities such as running errands, mowing the lawn, answering the phone, etc.

8. Providing Benefit Information to the Family

The department will maintain an up-to-date list of death benefits available to survivors. The department will establish procedures on dealing with the family, including:

1. Assigning a benefits coordinator to handle all contact with survivors. The coordinator will help the survivors access and process required paperwork
2. Providing a list of financial planners and legal advisors that the survivors may want to contact

9. Assisting the Family After the Funeral

The department will maintain contact with the family and establish procedures to ensure ongoing support, including:

1. Continuing to invite the family to department events
2. Ensuring all death benefits have been processed
3. Considering the establishment of a permanent tribute such as a scholarship, dedication of a facility, etc.

Procedural Components

Sample Statements

4. Referring the family to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation for information on its Survivor Support Network
5. Helping the family attend national and state memorial services

10. Establishing a Community Response Network

The department will consider setting up a community response network that can be activated if a tragedy occurs. The department will work with the community to establish procedures that allow immediate support to the family, including:

1. Working with the Highway Patrol on providing or escorting family members from out of town
2. Contacting local funeral homes to determine if they defer funeral costs and offer burial plots for line-of-duty deaths of public safety officers
3. Working with local hotels, motels and restaurants to provide lodging and meals for families attending the funeral
4. Finding childcare providers to assist families with small children during this period
5. Identifying local banks that will provide services to the family for handling donations and other death-related transactions

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