# In-Person Death Notifications

## Model Policy

*March 2025*

New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services
80 South Swan Street, Albany, New York 12210

www.criminaljustice.ny.gov

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# Model Policy

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The In-Person Death Notifications Model Policy was developed to provide law enforcement agencies with guidance to assist them in developing their own policy and training. The use of this policy is not mandatory.

The Municipal Police Training Council (MPTC) approved the model policy in March 2025.

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# In-Person Death Notifications – Model Policy

Municipal Police Training Council

## I. PURPOSE

Death notification can be one of the most difficult tasks faced by law enforcement officers and an extremely traumatic event for the next of kin (NOK) and family members. The moment of notification is one that most people remember very vividly for the rest of their life. To a grieving family, the proper handling of a death notification by law enforcement that includes compassion, respect, and care when they find out their loved one has died can aid in helping families find hope and healing.

This policy is intended to provide personnel who are assigned responsibilities associated with delivering an in-person death notification to the (NOK) with the tools to properly plan, prepare, and deliver the notification, as well as conduct follow-up after the notification.

## II. POLICY

When it's determined the law enforcement agency is responsible to deliver the in-person death notification, law enforcement personnel assigned will adhere to policies and procedures for the planning, delivery, and post notification processes including but not limited to, the identification of the deceased individual, the collection of accurate information regarding the deceased individual, the identification of the deceased individual's NOK and the timely delivery of the notification.

This policy is intended to allow for the individual needs of each of the police agencies in New York State regardless of size or resource limitations. Law enforcement agencies are encouraged to customize these protocols to meet their agency's needs while being mindful of the intent of the policy.

## III. DEFINITIONS

A. **Decedent** - The person(s) that has/have died and is the subject of the in-person death notification.

B. **Family Assistance Center (FAC)** - A family assistance center (FAC) is a secure facility established following a mass casualty incident to provide information to next of kin about missing or unaccounted persons and the deceased, and to provide services for victims and their loved ones.

C. **Next of Kin (NOK)** - The closest relative of the decedent (e.g., spouse, parents, siblings, significant others, and children).

D. **Notification Team** - A team of two people, at least one of whom is a uniformed LEO who has experience in delivering in-person death notifications and has received training in the same. The second member may be an additional LEO, victim advocate, chaplain, social worker or other individual deemed an appropriate team member. The team is responsible for ensuring both a timely positive identification has been made of the decedent and notification of the death to the appropriate family member(s) is made in addition to any necessary follow-up support.



Approved by Municipal Police Training Council
March 5, 2025

## IV. In-Person Death Notification Procedures

A. Planning the in-person death notification

1. Gather and verify essential information using a secure means of communication (i.e., landlines, cell phones) to guard against the premature release of information to unauthorized persons.

a) Identification of decedent – Positive identification of the decedent must be made before conducting the in-person death notification to ensure there is no unnecessary trauma towards the affected NOK and others who may be mistakenly contacted. In addition, the NOK will often inquire about law enforcement's certainty of the decedent's identification. The following are Identifiers to ensure the decedent has been positively identified which may include but not be limited to:

(1) Fingerprints, DNA, and dental records

(2) Identification documents or other items found on the decedent

(3) Identification by witnesses

b) Identify details of decedent – Details and circumstances of the death must be known to deliver a proper death notification statement which may include but not be limited to:

(1) Location of death

(2) When death occurred

(3) How death occurred

(4) Other details such as:

(a) Was it a result of criminal act?

(b) Was an arrest made or suspect identified?

(5) Current location of the decedent

c) Identify decedent's legal NOK

(1) Identify the closest NOK with respect to relationship of the decedent and physical location of the NOK to deliver the notification. Identification of NOK should be conducted as quickly as possible beginning with spouse or domestic

partner, and if necessary, followed by adult child, parent, adult sibling, and other relatives until an appropriate NOK is identified.

(2) Identify, when reasonably possible given time limitations, any special or unique circumstances that may impact the delivery of the notification and affect the NOK who will be receiving the notification. This may include ascertaining whether survivors are older adults, have a disability, visually impaired, hard of hearing, have medical concerns, and/or existence of language barriers.

d) Do not release to the media or other outside resources the name of the decedent until the NOK is notified. If media has already obtained information related to the death, they should be asked to withhold the information until after the notification has been completed.

2. Notification Team

a) Team member structure

(1) Two members will comprise the team with at least one member being a law enforcement officer experienced in delivering death notifications, whenever feasible and practicable.

(a) One member will be the primary contact to deliver the notification.

(b) The second member will provide support and monitor the NOK and surroundings.

(2) Consider the following characteristics of effective team members that will aid in supporting the family during a difficult time.

(a) Strong listening skills

(b) Empathy

(c) Compassion

(d) Thoroughness

(e) Professional demeanor

(3) Consideration should be given to:

(a) Utilizing a uniform versus plain clothes officer.

(i) Uniform officer may be utilized to prevent confusion in allowing entry into a home.

(ii) In some instances, a plain clothes officer may be utilized to remove intimidating feeling or heightened anxieties a uniformed officer may create.

(b) Utilizing an investigator who may have the most facts about the case to deliver the notification.

(c) Utilizing two vehicles to deliver the notification to ensure one notifier stays with the NOK during instances such as when:

(i) A NOK in shock may need to be taken to the hospital; or

(ii) Transportation is necessary to bring other family, friends, and support to the location.

(4) Depending on the situation, a civilian who can provide necessary support to the NOK, including support after the notification is made, may also be of assistance. This may include civilians such as a:

(a) victim advocate,

(b) medical examiner,

(c) coroner,

(d) clergy person,

(e) grief counselor, or

(f) close friend of single survivor.

B. Preparing the notification

1. Notification Team will:

a) Assign pre-planned roles that includes one team member conducting the actual notification and the other serving a support role monitoring the situation.

b) Verify and confirm information gathered about decedent and NOK and tailor the notification, as necessary.

(1) Pre-determine the level of detail about the specific cause of death to be provided to the NOK.

(2) Careful consideration must be made regarding releasing certain details if the death is part of a criminal investigation.

(3) Prepare to explain to the NOK why certain details are being withheld at the time of the notification to reduce additional frustration or grief.

c) Identify any resources that will assist in tailoring the delivery of the notification giving attention to any known special considerations (see section V).

d) Discuss reactions Notification Team members may have about the decedent's death to better prepare for a calm and impartial delivery of the notification without imposing personal thoughts or religious beliefs onto the NOK.

e) Prepare in advance responses to how the NOK may react (e.g., shock, fear, anger, confusion, extreme distress, adverse physical or medical reaction).

f) Rehearse delivering the notification to ensure a clear and compassionate delivery.

2. When NOK is located out of state or otherwise an impractical distance

a) Communicate with local law enforcement in the vicinity of the NOK so that they can make the in-person notification.

b) Provide necessary information to the local police department including but not limited to:

(1) The full name, date of birth, and other identifiers of the decedent.

(2) The full name and address of the NOK to be notified.

(3) A synopsis of the circumstances surrounding the decedent's death.

(4) The name, address, and telephone number of the location where the decedent is located.

(5) Contact information of the investigating officer and their police department.

c) Consideration may be given to providing the local police department with any guidance in delivering the notification consistent with this policy.

d) Verify with the notifying agency that the notification has been made.

e) Referring Notification Team members shall be available to answer additional questions the family may have for the local police department making the notification.

3. Contact the proper foreign embassy when the decedent and their family is not a resident of the United States.

4. Follow the guidelines within this policy to conduct an in-person death notification on behalf of an outside requesting agency. This will require obtaining the necessary information from the requesting agency to ensure a properly planned and delivered notification is made.

C. Delivering the Death Notification

1. The death notification shall always be made in-person to the decedent's NOK within twenty-four hours following the identification of the decedent. If the closest NOK is unavailable or there is reason to believe there will be considerable delay in conducting an in-person death notification within such timeframe, the following steps shall be taken:

a) Document the failure or delay;

b) Notify a supervisor;

c) Evaluate time elapsed and the need to notify the next closest NOK; and

d) Conduct the notification as soon as practicable.

2. Personal items of the decedent shall not be delivered to the NOK at the time of the death notification.

3. Introduction of Notification Team to NOK

a) Verify accuracy of the location upon arrival.

b) Identify Notification Team by name, rank, and department affiliation to the NOK and produce credentials. If wearing a hat, take it off.

c) Ask to speak to the immediate NOK by name and verify identity. For example ask, “Are you Dave and Mary Smith?” Confirm the relationship to the decedent.

(1) If immediate NOK identified during planning stage is not the first contact with the Notification Team, request the individual to provide whereabouts of NOK without providing explanations at that time.

(2) If NOK is to be notified at a place of business see Section V, F (Workplace/business notifications).

d) Ask permission to enter the residence or, in the case of a workplace/business or other location, move to a place of privacy.

e) Consult with the immediate NOK to determine if other members of the family who may be present are to be brought together for the notification.

f) Ask to speak with the NOK away from young children if present unless the NOK has requested their presence while a notification is being delivered. (See Section V, A.)

g) Encourage all parties to sit down. Notification Team should sit as well.

4. Making the notification

a) Use plain language with warmth and compassion avoiding police jargon and gruesome details.

b) Be sure to use the decedent’s name and avoid such terms as “remains”, “corpse” or “the body.”

c) Begin the notification with a preparatory statement. “I am sorry to have to tell you this,” or “I have some very bad news to tell you.”

d) Immediately follow up with the actual notification spoken plainly with compassion, but without confusing terms or euphemisms such as “passed away” or “no longer with us” to avoid creating

confusion or false hope. Examples of statements that are appropriate to use:

(1) "Your son, John, was in a car crash and he has died," or

(2) "Your wife, Mary, has had a heart attack at work and has died."

D. Post notification

1. Be prepared for unexpected responses from NOK survivors such as fainting, hysteria, and possible verbal or physical assault. Additional assistance may be needed from victim assistance providers, emergency medical technicians, or others to help calm these situations.

2. Let the NOK show emotion allowing NOK sufficient time to regain composure following delivery of the notification.

3. The NOK may have questions; be sure to answer honestly and compassionately.

a) If you don't know the answer – say so and offer to get back to them with the information.

b) If you know that there are additional steps for the NOK (e.g., identifying the decedent, law enforcement interview, etc.) then advise them.

4. The Notification Team shall **avoid**:

a) Enhancing guilt – "if only you had or had not".

b) Comparing victimization – no one's pain or grief is worse than another's.

c) Imposing religious beliefs – do not try to persuade them to your convictions.

d) Talking family members out of their grief – such as:

(1) You have to be strong and keep going on;

(2) You're not the only one suffering;

(3) Your anguish won't bring them back; and

(4) You have to get on with your life.

e) Making false promises – do not make a promise you cannot deliver, especially regarding any criminal justice system outcomes.

5. Helpful remarks that do not discount their feelings include:

   a) I am so sorry.

   b) It's harder than people think.

   c) This must be painful for you.

   d) Tell me more about him/her.

   e) Go ahead and grieve.

6. Inform the NOK survivor of any chance to view the decedent's body and/or necessary visual identification. Arrangements for the viewing or visual identification of the decedent by NOK may be made by the Notification Team, including transportation to and from the hospital or morgue.

7. If an autopsy is required, the Notification Team should be able to explain the reason and provide a general non-graphic explanation of the procedure.

8. Do not leave the NOK, especially a lone survivor unattended, unless you are reasonably confident they have adequate personal control and/or support to take care of themselves and those whom they may be responsible for.

   a) Gauging the need for support/assistance shall include but not be limited to:

      (1) The emotional reaction and physical condition of the NOK to include:

         (a) Awareness of the officer'(s) presence.

         (b) Grasp of the place, time, and reality of the death.

         (c) Progressive ability to express themselves is demonstrated.

      (2) The availability of a support system including friends, family, close neighbors, access to clergy, means of transportation, other adults in the home, etc.

      (3) Care for infants or small children, persons with disabilities, and older persons or the infirmed.

b) Support can be established by:

(1) Asking if you can call anyone for them such as relatives, friends, and clergy that can provide support and offer to wait for them to arrive.

(2) Being prepared and willing to provide transportation for individuals to bring them to the NOK.

9. Ask NOK if you can follow up in 24-hours and be sure to follow through.

10. Leave name and contact information of Notification Team members for NOK to call should any further questions arise.

11. Provide information regarding the availability of services and programs available through the NYS Office of Victim Services if the incident prompting the death notification was a crime, including access to victim compensation and victim support services.[1]

E. Follow-Up

1. Within 24 hours contact the NOK if permission to do so was provided by NOK.

2. Answer any additional questions or provide any further clarification, including any information on the release of the decedent to the funeral home or the release of the decedent's personal items (i.e., how to obtain them, timeframe, etc.).

3. Team members may consider providing a referral list of professionals and community resources to the NOK where appropriate.

F. Upon conclusion of the notification, the Notification Team should meet to debrief events of the notification to include reflecting on emotions/feelings and to deconstruct the actual delivery notification.

1. The process of delivering such traumatic news can leave the Notification Team members frustrated, disappointed, and emotionally upset.
2. These feelings are normal and often best addressed in a formal manner using proper resources, such as:

a) Trained law enforcement peers.

b) Trained law enforcement chaplain(s).

[1] Help, Healing & Hope brochure for crime victims: https://ovs.ny.gov/ovs-brochure (available in multiple languages) and OVS Resource Connect for information about state-funded local victim assistance programs.

c) Culturally competent mental health counselors/clinicians.

## II. Special Considerations

A. Children

1. Death notifications shall not be made directly to a child unless the NOK has requested a child should be present while a notification is being delivered.

2. Death notifications to a child should be delivered by a person the child trusts.

a) Members of the Notification Team can aid in delivering the notification to a child, if requested by the NOK.

b) If assistance is requested, use age-appropriate language while sitting at the same level as the child.

B. Persons with disabilities or older adults.

1. Notification Team members should be familiar with general effective communication techniques when interacting with people with disabilities or older adults. For persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, be prepared to communicate via writing, speech (lip) reading or American Sign Language. It is the choice of the person as to what mode of communication should be utilized, not the officer.

2. If the person has an intellectual disability, the officer should use plain English/simple language. They may need to rephrase their statement.

3. Consider having a family member or support staff person who knows the individual well accompany the officer. Receive direction on how to best speak to the person and what the response may entail.

C. Language barriers

1. Utilize local language services if there is an existence of a language barrier that will impede the delivery of the notification.

2. Never use a child to translate the death notification to the NOK.

D. Social media can pose a challenge to the death notification process as the NOK could already be aware of their loved one's death. In this instance, it is important to explain to the family that it takes time to ensure accurate information is gathered before an official notification can be made.

E. Mass Casualty Events

1. Coordination in managing the death notifications among responding law enforcement agencies and the local coroner/medical examiner's office is essential and treated as a priority. Where multiple law enforcement agencies are involved, the lead agency in managing the death notification process must be clearly designated to include the responsibility of the establishment, implementation, and any necessary oversight of a Family Assistance Center.[2]

2. Determination will be made with law enforcement partners if a private area within a family assistance center should be used to make the death notifications, where practicable.

3. Notifications should be done as quickly as possible following positive victim identification. NOK are frequently aware from social media, television coverage, and communications from survivors and witnesses that their loved ones are potential casualties.

   a) When practicable, designate one Notification Team per family, with as many Notification Teams as necessary based on the circumstances.

   b) If appropriate, make notifications on a rolling basis to each family as the identity of each victim becomes verified rather than delivering the notifications only after all victims have been identified.

4. Once the notification is delivered, you may have to explain the investigative and identification process to the NOK, particularly if it may result in a delay in releasing the body of the decedent. Make sure that the NOK knows where to obtain follow-up information on when and how the decedent will be released.

5. Alert NOK that there may be a press conference or other public release of information by authorities and that the family may want to think through how to respond to or avoid press inquiries whether by phone, electronic communication or at their homes.

F. Workplace/business notifications

1. Locate the NOK's manager or supervisor upon arrival at the workplace/business requesting to meet with the employee regarding a family emergency. Do not divulge additional information.

2. Request the manager or supervisor to provide a private room.

[2] Mass Fatality Family Assistance Operations: Recommended Strategies for Local and State Agencies https://www.nmvvrc.org/media/tw5lw23j/mass-fatality-incident-family-assistance-operations.pdf

3. Follow best practices procedures outlined in Section IV for delivering an in-person death notification.

4. Offer to notify the manager or supervisor regarding the notification, if preferred by NOK. Allow the NOK to determine what information is to be shared with their manager or supervisor.

G. Criminal investigations

1. If there is an ongoing criminal investigation it is important to explain to the family members that they may be contacted to assist with the investigation.

2. When the subject or perpetrator is deceased, the same process applies when making the death notification.

3. It is suggested practice to use separate notification teams for the victim and perpetrator for death notifications. For example, a murder suicide situation or DWI crash where the drunk driver and the victim are both deceased.

4. As in any notification, avoid adding personal opinions during the notification especially if the victim and perpetrator are from the same family.

## III. Training

A. Law enforcement personnel who are assigned responsibilities associated with delivering an in-person death notification to NOK will receive training on the procedures to do so prior to conducting a notification. Periodic retraining is recommended at a frequency of every three years.

B. Training on delivering in-person death notifications will include agency procedures on the following areas to include but not be limited to:

1. Planning the in-person death notification

a) Identification of the decedent

b) Collection of accurate information regarding the decedent

c) Identification of the decedent's NOK

2. Assembling death notification team

3. Preparing for delivery of in-person death notification

4. Delivering the in-person death notification

5. Conducting post notification and follow-up

6. Addressing special circumstances