

Managing the Complex Issues Involved with Line-of-duty Death

Cpt. Johnny M. Johnson, *Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, Law Enforcement Section, 64 North Union St., Montgomery, AL 36130-1456*

Abstract: On 25 March 2002, an Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officer died of complications from a gunshot wound received while serving a search warrant. The Enforcement Section had no formal guidelines related to line-of-duty deaths at the time the officer died. Agencies should be prepared to deal with line-of-duty deaths and have formal guidelines in place to aid the agency in effectively managing the multitude of issues involved. Fish and wildlife enforcement is a high-risk profession and every agency has faced or will have to face this reality. According to the organization Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), over the last decade an average of between 150 to 165 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty each year. By sharing these guideline for handling line-of-duty deaths, agencies will be better prepared to deal with this traumatic event in a manner which will minimize the trauma and aid in the recovery process.

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The Alabama conservation enforcement officer (CEO) was shot on 8 March 2002 in the lower abdomen with a .380 caliber handgun. He had numerous surgeries following the shooting. The officer died at home 3 weeks later from a respiratory embolism related to the gunshot wound. He was 35 years old and had been employed with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for 4 years. He was an outstanding officer with great potential. He left behind a 12 year-old daughter, a mother, a father, and several siblings. The following questions and issues had to be dealt with immediately following the officer's death:

1. Identifying the officer's survivors and where contact information is located.
2. Making death notifications.
3. Providing transportation for family.
4. Providing a liaison officer to assist family.
5. Ascertaining from family the type of memorial and funeral services desired.
6. Contacting enforcement honor guard personnel.
7. Coordinating press releases and contacts.
8. Notifying agency personnel and other agencies regarding arrangements and details.
9. Identifying and facilitating benefits for survivors.
10. Speaking at memorial service.

The purpose of this guideline is to help those who must notify and assist survivors of the death of a family member due to homicide, an automobile crash, a heart attack, drowning, or other sudden and unexpected events. Although this guideline is intended to address the line-of-duty death or injury of agency enforcement personnel, many provisions may be applicable to any agency employee regardless of whether or not the death is duty-related.

Personal Data Information

In order to contact the deceased officer's survivors, a personal data sheet will be maintained on each enforcement officer by the supervisor. It shall be the responsibility of the supervisor to maintain and update this data sheet. A personal data sheet example may assist agencies with line-of-duty death notification (Fig. 1). It is important to retain as much personal information as possible. Complete physical addresses must be maintained to enable the agency to locate family members. This is especially important when family members are initially contacted.

Death Notification

1. The name of the deceased officer will not be released to the media before immediate survivors living in the area have been notified (Sayer 1993).

2. If there is knowledge of a medical problem with an immediate survivor, medical personnel will be dispatched to the residence to coincide with the death notification.

3. Notification will always be made in person and never by one person alone. The supervisor or his representative and one other officer will handle the personal notification.

Keep in mind if the above-suggested persons are not readily accessible, the notification should not be delayed. If there is opportunity to get the family to the hospital prior to the death of the officer, don't wait for the appropriate delegation to gather.

As soon as most law enforcement families see you, they will know something is wrong. Ask to be admitted into the house. Never make a death notification on the doorstep. Gather everyone in the home and ask him or her to sit down. Inform them slowly and clearly of the information you have on the incident. Make sure you use the officer's name during the notification (Bennett et al. 1992).

If the officer has already died, relay that information. Never give the family a false sense of hope. Use words like "died" and "dead" rather than "gone away" or "passed away."

If the person responsible for the death notification has been seriously affected by the death, he/she should understand that showing emotions is perfectly acceptable.

If specifics of the incident are known, the officer should relay as much information as possible to the family. Reactions of the family may include hysteria, anger, fainting, physical violence, or shock.

4. If the family wants to go to the hospital, they should be transported via department vehicle. It is highly recommended that the family not drive themselves to

Personal Data Sheet		District I	W.A.F.F.L.E.	
			Radio Number _____	
Name: (Last, First, MI)	SSN	DOB	Sex _M_ _F_	Date of Employment
Physical Address:	Mailing Address (Reg. Book):		Home Phone: ()	
			Cell Phone: ()	
			Assigned County:	
			Medical Insurance Name:	
Drivers License Number	Weight	Height		
Name of Spouse	Spouse Work Phone Number	Spouse Emp. Name & Address		
Children's Names & Phone #				
1)	4)	Highest Level of Education:		
2)	5)			
3)	6)			
Parents' Names:	Parents' Ph.#	Major:		
		Parents' Address:		
Contact, in case of Emergency: (other than spouse, must have two)				
Name:	Relationship:	Phone Number:	Address:	
		Home:		
		Work:		
Name:	Relationship:	Phone Number:	Address:	
		Home:		
		Work:		
Special Medications/Conditions:	Allergies:			
	Diabetic: ___ Yes ___ No			
Family Physician's Name:	Dr.'s Phone #	Dr.'s Address:		
Are you in the National Guard? ___ Yes ___ No			Are you an Organ Donor?	
If yes, name and address of Unit:			Blood Type:	
Contact Name for Unit:			CPR Certified? ___ Y ___ N	
Contact Phone Number for Unit:				
Do you have a part-time job? ___ Yes ___ No				
If yes, please list Name, Address, Phone Number of Employer:				
Comments:				
Date form completed:				

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Figure 1. Sample of personal datasheet.

the hospital. Should there be serious resistance and the family insists on driving, have an officer accompany them in the vehicle.

The department should be prepared to provide immediate childcare for any young children the survivors wish to remain at home. The supervisor or his representative in the district will be responsible for these arrangements.

Due to the possibility of radio transmission problems, the officer providing

transportation should notify the officer in charge (OIC) at the hospital by telephone that the family is en-route. Radio transmissions could be intercepted by the deceased officer's family so the officer making the transport and other officers should avoid any radio transmissions related to the deceased officer.

Surviving parents will be afforded this same courtesy of personal notification if they live in the same geographic area.

5. If immediate survivors are from out of town, request personal death notification from the public safety agency in that area. Arrangements should be made to enable simultaneous contact with other enforcement agencies.

Assisting the Family at the Hospital

1. Arrangements to provide appropriate waiting facilities for the family and fellow officers should be made by the supervisor or other representative.

An emergency room liaison (ERL) will be appointed to act as information liaison for medical personnel to the family of the officer and the department. The ERL will insure that pertinent information on the officer's condition is relayed on a timely basis. They shall also make the family and fellow officers aware of hospital policy about visitation with the injured officer and/or visitation with the body following the death, and explain why an autopsy is needed.

If it is possible for the family to visit their loved one prior to death, they most certainly should be afforded that opportunity. It is the family's right to visit their loved one. The ERL should "prepare" the family for what they might see in the emergency room and accompany the family into the room for the visit if requested. Be honest and do not give false hope. Do not be overly-protective of the family. "There is a definite need to touch and hold the body while there is still life, being present when death occurs can be comforting to the family" (Sawyer 1993).

Survivors will need time, even days, before accepting the deceased officer's personal effects. Eventually, they will want all of his/her belongings. The ERL will be responsible for securing all items belonging to the fallen officer. The ERL will assist the survivors with recovery of items if they are in the custody of law enforcement officials.

2. The ERL will see that the family is updated on the incident as soon as the family arrives at the hospital.

3. The supervisor or other representative will be present the entire time the family is at the hospital and should arrange whatever assistance the family may need at that time.

4. The people who made the initial notification should be among those at the hospital.

5. Idle promises should never be made to the family at this time, (i.e., "We'll promote him/her posthumously." "We'll retire his/her badge.")

6. The ERL will be responsible for arrangements of medical bills relating to the services rendered to the deceased officer and see that these are sent to the appropriate government agency for payment. The family should not receive any of these bills at their residence.

Support for the Family During the Wake or Funeral

1. The supervisor or his representative will act as the family liaison officer (FLO). Although the liaison officer should know the deceased officer and be aware of the family relationships, the officer should not be so emotionally involved with the loss that he/she would become ineffective. The FLO must know that this is not a decision-making position. This is a role of “facilitator” between the family and the agency.

The family liaison officer will:

A. Insure that the needs of the family come before the wishes of the department.

B. Meet with the family and tell them what his/her responsibilities will be during this time.

C. Meet with the family regarding funeral arrangements. Since most officers have not prearranged their wishes for the handling of their own funeral, the family will most likely need to decide all aspects of the funeral. The department should only make the family aware of what they can offer in the way of assistance if the family decides to have “line-of-duty” funeral (honor guard, 21-gun salute, presenting of the flag, playing of the bagpipes, and playing of Taps). The supervisor will maintain contact information regarding other enforcement agencies that provide said services. The supervisor will be responsible for making all the arrangements for “line-of-duty” funeral. The family has the option of excluding any portion of the funeral process.

D. Be issued a cell phone so there is an immediate line of communication.

E. Know all information concerning the death, the investigation, and answer family questions.

F. Be constantly available to the family throughout this traumatic process.

G. See that the surviving parents are afforded recognition and will have proper placement arranged for them during the funeral and funeral procession.

H. See that the family is briefed on the funeral procedure (i.e., order of happenings, 21-gun salute, presenting of the flag, and playing of Taps).

2. A supervisor/public information officer will be designated to handle the media throughout this traumatic ordeal. If criminal violations surround the death, the family will be informed of all developments prior to any press release. In the unlikely event that the family should decide to accept an interview, this officer will attend and advise the family to avoid jeopardizing upcoming legal proceedings.

3. Department vehicles will be made available to the family if they desire transportation to and from the funeral home.

Identifying and Facilitating Benefits for Survivors

The supervisor or the designated benefits officer will gather information on all benefits/funeral payments available to the family. Insure that benefits officer has the agency’s full support to fulfill the responsibility to the survivors to coordinate all death benefits/payments (i.e., insurance policies, outstanding debts, and educational benefits). The officer should be completely responsible for filing appropriate paper-

work and following through with the family to insure that these benefits are being received.

The benefits officer should visit with the surviving family members within a few days following the funeral to discuss the benefits they will receive. A printout of the benefits/funeral payments due the family, contact information for various benefits, and when these benefits can be expected should be made available to the family. A copy of the printout should also be given to the guardians(s) of any child/children from any former marriages. This same procedure should be repeated within a month following the funeral since the initial contact is clouded due to the emotional numbness of the family during the first benefit meeting. Special attention should be made to avoid possible revocation of health benefits for the surviving family members. The benefits officer will continue to make contact with the family every 6 months to check on the status of the available benefits.

The benefits officer should find out if the deceased officer was a member of any organization or group that will provide an attorney/financial counselor to the surviving family for whatever legal/financial counseling is necessary. The attorney should not be affiliated with the jurisdictional government, and should work solely as an advocate for the family's interest.

In order for the benefits officer to quickly and thoroughly complete necessary paperwork for available benefits, the following forms must be supplied by the family to the benefits officer:

1. Marriage license
2. Certified copy of death certificate (It is recommended that the family order 8–10 copies.)
3. Certified copies of all minor child/children birth certificates
4. Social security numbers for all possible beneficiaries
5. Certified copy of divorce papers
6. Current addresses, telephone numbers, and full names of all possible beneficiaries

Contacting Agencies Regarding Arrangements

Many difficulties may arise as the agency attempts to relay information to officers and agencies regarding location of funeral home and cemetery, times of memorial service and visitation, and hotel accommodations. The family liaison officer's responsibilities will include relaying all of the aforementioned information to the supervisor who will then disperse information to department personnel and other agencies. It is important to organize this information, to be sure that it is thorough and accurate, and to relay it quickly. In addition, a record should be maintained of those to whom this information has been forwarded to avoid anyone accidentally being neglected.

Tribute to Officer

Agency personnel may be requested to speak at a memorial service for a deceased officer. If so, he/she must be prepared. To lend support to the supervisor who

Table 1. Sample tribute to a fallen officer.

Today the Wildlife and Freshwater Division acknowledges the death of Officer (use full name of the officer the first time it is said), _____ in the service of his country.

Officer _____ died doing a job he/she loved, serving a country he/she loved even more. Officer _____ has become a part of all that is decent and honorable and intrepid about America.

But to think Officer _____ is heroic because of his/her death is to miss the significance of this service. What was so noble about Officer _____ was not how he/she died, but how he/she lived.

Officer _____ did not lose his/her life, he/she gave it. That is what we are honoring here today. A Wildlife Officer pledges to keep our "todays" safe, knowing full well it could cost him/her their "tomorrows."

May this service serve to acknowledge in some small way the heroic person you loved and lost. The Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division cannot take away your grief, but it is our hope that by acknowledging the greatness within the heart of the one you loved, it may help to wipe away your tears. May this service serve as a reminder that Officer _____ will never be forgotten.

must respond to this challenge and to add the agency's acknowledgment of the sacrifice made, this sample presentation (Internatl. Assoc. Chiefs Police 2002) may assist a line-of-duty death tribute (Table 1).

This tribute is also appropriate for other ceremonies such as awards, presentations, and legislative recognition. Many organizations such as Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS), the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), Peace Officers Association, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Sheriffs' Association, and the North American Wildlife Enforcement Officers Association are examples of organizations that honor fallen officers. Designated personnel need to be prepared for accompanying the family to these ceremonies and making appropriate remarks.

Follow Up

The agency should send officers on routine residence check(s) by the survivor's home for 6–8 weeks following the death. The officer will ascertain from the survivors if any unwanted telephone calls are being received or if the family has any special needs.

Designated personnel will be responsible for maintaining information regarding all personnel and agencies that assisted with all aspects of line-of-duty death. Letters of recognition are to be written to all individuals and agencies that assisted in any way with the line-of-duty death proceedings.

Conclusion

Mainly and foremost, the goal of any agency involved with line-of-duty death is to serve the survivors by carrying out this difficult duty in a professional and supportive manner. The agency must deal with many complex issues regarding the unexpected death of an officer. Be prepared: you owe it to your subordinates and their survivors. Don't wait till you get that call advising you, "One of your offices has paid the ultimate price," and wonder "What do I do now?" By sharing this information with the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, agency personnel will be prepared to assist the family of a fallen officer.

Literature Cited

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