DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

Unfortunately, tragedies such as on-the-job death or serious injury occur in the workplace or to client employees while traveling away from home (such as salesmen or truck drivers). In such tragedies, it is important that the family of the employee be notified in a caring and competent way. In most situations, the notification is handled by a client company leader or company Human Resource professional. However, in some instances, MChapUSA chaplains are asked to be involved in the notification of the family members.

Chaplains perform this service only at the request of the client company. However, because this is a service provided under our letter of agreement with client companies, there may be instances in which a chaplain will tactfully offer to assist in such notifications.

Chaplains making such notification visits are sometimes accompanied by one or more client leaders. In other instances, client officials are not personally involved in this contact with the family but a chaplain is asked to handle the notification as part of chaplain care and as a representative of the company’s Employee Care Program.

The following guide is intended to assist the chaplain in thinking through the several steps in the notification process. So practical do’s and don’ts are provided as well as some suggested language as to what to say and what not to say, as well as some ways to point the family to additional resources.

I. TAKE TIME TO PREPARE

Prepare Practically

1. One of the most important steps in preparation is to coordinate activities with the client company. It is necessary that a chaplain have approval from the proper authority before taking any action.
   - MChapUSA chaplains will look to the company for direction. The chaplain’s role is to support the company and the family.
   - Find out as much as possible about the event, including the full identity of the person involved, as well as the time and place it occurred. Take time to get as many details as possible and make notes.
   - Find out if anyone from the company will be accompanying the chaplain when the notification is made.
   - Review with the company contact person the facts that are to be shared at the notification.

2. Try to learn as much as possible about the next of kin, and the immediate family
   - Try to find out about their religious background, ethnicity, and anything else that might affect the notification.
   - Try to find out if the next of kin has a medical or mental health condition.
3. If no one from the client company will participate in the notification, contact your chaplain supervisor and begin to put together the chaplain team that will be involved.
   • If only chaplains are involved, then two or three chaplains will almost always participate in the notification. NEVER MAKE A NOTIFICATION ALONE.
   • If the next of kin to be notified is a female, it is best to have a female chaplain as part of the team.
   • If there will be both a male and a female chaplain as part of the team, include one other male chaplain as well.

Prepare Spiritually
   • Even though a chaplain does not ordinarily refer to Scripture when making a death or serious injury notification, some personal time with comforting Bible passages can help each chaplain be spiritually prepared.
   • Pray for guidance, wisdom and understanding.

Prepare Emotionally
   • Recognize that Death and Serious Injury Notifications are intensely emotional events for the chaplain as well as the family.
   • Each chaplain involved in the notification should assess his or her own emotional state:
     - current emotional status
     - similar or recent personal loss
   • If a chaplain is not emotionally prepared, then another chaplain should serve.

Prepare As a Team
   • The team should discuss together as a team what is known about the event and the family.
   • The team should plan ahead of time who will be the primary speaker and the role that each team member will provide. If the chaplain is accompanying representatives from the client company, it is advisable for the chaplain to determine ahead of time what role he or she should provide.

II. CONSIDER WHERE THE NOTIFICATION WILL BE MADE

At The Home of the Next of Kin
   • Most often death notifications are made at the home of the next of kin.
   • Prepare ahead of time to locate the address.
   • Try to find out what, if any, other family members may be there (this is not always possible).

At Someone Else’s Home
   • Try to first talk to the person whose home it is and explain briefly why you are there.
   • Ask for a quiet, private place or room where you might talk to the next of kin.
   • Invite the host to meet with you and the next of kin
At Work

- When a notification must be made a work, speak first to the human resource office or to the employee’s supervisor and briefly explain the purpose of the notification.
- Ask for a room or private area where you can meet. Wait there while the HR person or supervisor brings the next of kin to you.
- Request that the supervisor not say anything as to the purpose of the visit but simply say that there are some people here who have some important information for you.

At the Hospital

- Seldom will a death notification be given at the hospital but occasionally a notification of serious injury is made there.
- Make every effort to avoid talking with the next of kin in a public area but rather try to find a private waiting room in which to make the notification.

III. THE ACTUAL NOTIFICATION

Arriving at the Home

- Have a brief prayer time just before getting out of the car.
- Bring a business card or other identification to show you are a chaplain and/or are representing the client company.
- It is a good idea to bring your cell phone along for an emergency situation but put it on “vibrate.”

What to Say

(It is okay to “script” remarks in advance but use with sensitivity and compassion.)

1. Introduce yourself and other members of the notification team at the door.
   - Ask if you can come inside. (A death notification should not be done standing at the door.)
   - Ask them if there is a place for each of you to sit down.
2. Confirm the family member’s relation as well as the identity of the victim.
   - Establish good eye contact.
   - Use the full name and if possible the date of birth of the victim.
   - For example say, “Mr. / Mrs. [Name] are you related to [Full Name]. Is his date of birth [MMDDYY]?”
3. It is best to get directly to the point (the family member will know that something bad has occurred). Use simple words and a tone of sympathy and compassion.
   - For example, you might say, “I’m sorry to have to give you this news, but [Name] just died (or was seriously injured).”
   - Or you might say, “I’m sorry to have to tell you but [Name] had a heart attack at the office and died on the way to the hospital, etc.”
   - Avoid words like “fatal accident,” “mortal accident,” or “expired.”
4. Allow the family member a moment to understand what you’ve just said before moving on to provide any additional details. (A brief silence is okay and somewhat to be expected.)

5. Provide only those details that are important and relative, such when and where the event occurred and what hospital or funeral home is involved. It is okay to describe any efforts to save the life or treat the injury. For example you might say, “An emergency medical team arrived quickly and did their very best...” It is best to not go into detail as to how or why the event occurred. It will not likely be helpful and probably would only be speculation.

6. Allow the family member to ask any questions. Answer questions truthfully but it is okay to say that you don’t yet know those details.

7. Ask, “Are there other family members to be notified?”

8. Ask, “Do you have a pastor, or a friend or family member we could call to come over now?”

9. Do not give information about benefits but refer them to the Human Resource department.

10. Explain that you are also available to help with funeral arrangements and if needed can conduct the funeral service

Special Situations
Family Members Loses It or Breaks Down Uncontrollably

- Expect ANY kind of reaction (shock, disbelief, guilt, anger, verbal outburst). Don’t act surprised at their response or take any response personally.

- Be alert for potentially dangerous reactions (especially health related issues).

Children Are Involved

- If children are home when you meet with the family, ask the family member if you can speak to them without the children present.

- It is preferable that the child’s care giver provide the notification of death to the children.

- If the family member asks for your guidance in telling the child, offer these suggestions:

**NOTIFYING CHILDREN ABOUT A TRAGEDY OR DEATH**

1. Although it is okay for children to see you grieve, it is best to find a less emotional time to tell children about a tragedy or a death.

2. Describe simply what has happened using words that fit their age and development. It is generally best to use the word “die” when referring to a death.

3. If you are a person of faith, allow your faith to be a part of the discussion.

4. Children may ask questions immediately but more likely will ask questions later. Listen carefully as to exactly what the child wants to know. Answer honestly but appropriately.

5. Provide assurance – through your words and with young children an object like a familiar toy or object (like a blanket).

6. The library often has good books to use with children when there is a death or tragedy in the family.
IV. CONCLUDING THE NOTIFICATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Before Leaving

- After asking if the family has any questions, ask for permission to lead in prayer.
- Share any materials on grief.
- Leave a business card or a contact phone number.
- If the family member is alone, it is important in most instances to wait until another family member or friend arrives before leaving.

Follow-up

- If possible attend the funeral or memorial service.
- Call within a day or two to check on the family member.

V. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bob VandePol recommends that care providers use the following acronym for making death and serious injury notifications: A- C-T.

A: ACKNOWLEDGE

- Acknowledge what has happened (with compassion and sensitivity)
- Acknowledge the event’s impact upon others including yourself
- Without putting it in words, allow them to experience a wide range of reactions and emotions

C: COMMUNICATE

- Communicate your care and concern for those involved
- Communicate what has happened: “This is what we know at this time…."
- Communicate the competence and compassion of yourself and the notification team (without actually saying so, but by your sense of presence, your sensitivity and your composure).

T: TRANSITION (Transition to Next Steps and Refer)

- Focus first on any practical assistance needed - determine basic and practical needs
- Provide information about coping – emphasize resiliency
- Look for ways to transition the individual to additional support (as appropriate). Provide referral information as applicable: (Church/pastor, counseling center, community resources)

“Treat Every Notification of Death or Serious Injury As If It Were Your First”

1From Crisis Care Network Webinar “Bearing Bad Tidings: Death Notification”
Presenter: Bob VandePol, MSW
Date and Duration: June 25, 2009 for one hour
V. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (cont.)

1. Personal Experiences of Some of Our Retired Military Chaplains Who Performed Death Notifications During Their Service Careers:

**Joel Rayfield, Region Vice-President – Western Region**

“I have had the experience of a commander not being able to make the notification. The commander froze and was not able to make the notification nor was the nurse on the team. I was the one that actual made the notification.”

“I have also had the experience of the family wanting to know the details of an individual’s death. The temptation is to share what you think you know, but the only answer is I really do not know any details.”

**Wes Sullivan, Division Director – California Division**

“The chaplain generally accompanied the commander and provided immediate assistance as needed. There were times that this policy could not be followed and I had to make the notification myself. The most difficult one was to a soldier that was getting ready to go from Hawaii back to the mainland to marry his fiancée. She had drowned and the family asked that the chaplain make the notification.”

“Then there was the notification to a lady (wife) of a man killed when a car whose driver had a heart attack, crossed the grass median and hit him head on. They had been having marital problems. There had been difficult words before he went to work. Her plan was to leave him that night. When the police officer gave her the information she began to beat him on the chest. It was good that he was wearing a vest.”

“Sometimes the people already know the information or are expecting it. One notification I made was for a 16 year old boy killed in a boating accident from the other side of the state. The mother had already known there was an accident, but did not know that he had died. I wound up performing the funeral for the family.”

**Dave Schwabauer, Division Director – Minnesota/Wisconsin Division**

“I remember a time when we came to make a notification of the death of a sailor where the door was shut in our face and the family refused to come to the door for several hours. The Navy Officer and I stayed in the car in the front of the residence, and finally, after a long time, the family opened the door and moved away from the door. We took this as an invitation to come into the house. We went in and made the notification.

There were small elementary aged children in the family. When one of them, a young boy about 9 or 10 years of age, went outside, I followed him out. This young boy began to weep and I went to comfort him. When I did so he hugged me for a few minutes and then began to beat me on the legs, crying uncontrollably and asking why I would take his big brother away. I was just there for him and eventually he warmed up to me. The amazing thing was that this young man stuck to my side like he was glued there. We had many good conversations about life and death and I was able, in an age-appropriate way, to share Christ with him.”
The following grief care materials would not be useful in performing the actual notification of death or serious injury but could be very helpful for later follow-up.

2. MChapUSA Training Materials
   “Grief - A Guide to Providing Chaplain Care”

3. Hope for the Heart Biblical Counseling Key (can be viewed or downloaded from a link in CCS)
   “Grief Recovery – Living at Peace with Loss” (also available in Spanish)

4. RBC Booklets (can be ordered by your ATM or DD)
   1. When Tragedy Strikes
   2. How Can I Live With My Loss?
   3. Why Would God Allow Suffering?
   4. Is There Life After Death? (As appropriate and when requested)

5. Books on Grief Care-Giving
   Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook by June Hunt.
   The Christian Comfort Companion by Maceo Gray.
   Where is God When It Hurts? by Philip Yancey