Grant County Fire Protection District 3

POLICY AND PROCEDURE

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1. NUMBER: 4.3.11

2. SUBJECT: ***Firefighter Serious Injury and/or Death***

3. POLICY: There are several critical steps that need to be taken immediately after the serious injury or death of a co-worker. It is unrealistic to expect that we can spontaneously remember each of these items during the confusion that will almost certainly follow such an event. The presence of a simple check off form outlining the most critical steps to be covered will serve to guide us in our efforts to give our co-workers the best possible care in the worst possible situation. The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for Grant County Fire District 3 in the event a District Representative is killed or seriously injured in the line of duty.

4. SCOPE: This Policy and Procedure is applicable to all personnel of Grant County Fire District 3.

5. RESPONSIBILITIES:

   A. All firefighters and officers of the District shall use these policies and procedures in times of a Firefighter Serious Injury or Death.

6. DEFINITIONS:

   A. INJURY: A serious injury is to be defined as life threatening, internal or external injuries, smoke inhalation that requires ambulance transport to a hospital. Anytime the ambulance departs the scene in a priority mode.

   B. LINE-OF-DUTY DEATH: Any action which claims the life of a representative of Grant County Fire District 3 who was performing work related functions either while on or off duty.

   C. SURVIVORS: Immediate family members of the deceased: spouse, children, parents, siblings, fiancée and/or significant others.

   D. BENEFICIARY: Anyone designated as a recipient of specific death benefits.

   E. BENEFITS: Financial payments made to the family to ensure financial stability following the loss of a loved one.

   F. FUNERAL PAYMENTS: Financial payments made to surviving families of an individual killed in the line of duty which are specifically earmarked for funeral expenses.

7. PROCEDURE:

A. Notifications:

1. The name of the deceased or seriously injured, shall not be released to the media before immediate family or survivors are notified.
2. If there is knowledge of a medical problem with an immediate family member or survivor, medical personnel should be dispatched to the residence to coincide with the notification.
3. Notification shall be made in person and never alone; the notifying officer should be accompanied by the District Fire Chief, Chaplain, or another officer of the District. (Keep in mind that if the above suggested personnel are not available, notification should not be held up until they can gather.) If the opportunity exists to get the family to the hospital prior to death, DON'T WAIT for the appropriate delegation to gather.
4. Upon arrival, ask to be admitted to the home, don't make a notification standing on the doorway.
5. Gather everyone in the house and ask them to sit down; inform them slowly and clearly about the incident; relay as much information as is known. Consider having young children - 8 years and younger, taken to another room and informed at a later time, either by the parent or someone trained in early childhood development.
6. If the individual has already died, relay that information; never give the family a false sense of hope.
7. If the person doing the notification has been seriously affected by the death, he/she should understand that the showing of emotions is perfectly acceptable.
8. If the family wants to go to the hospital, it is appropriate to transport them by District vehicles. If there are children at home, the District should know and be ready to provide childcare, if needed.
9. If immediate survivors are from out of town, it may be possible to arrange for notification by personnel from another department or chaplain in that locale.
10. It can be most reassuring to the family when the District Fire Chief or other high-ranking officer responds to the home or hospital.
11. The Safety Officer shall notify the Safety Committee and prepare for an investigation of the incident.

B. Assisting the Family at the Hospital:

1. If it is possible for the family to visit their relative prior to death, they most certainly should be offered that opportunity. It is their right to visit their loved one. Do not be overly protective of the family, "there is a definite need to touch and hold their loved one while there is still life and being present when the death occurs can be comforting to the family."

2. A Chief Officer should be present while the family is at the hospital and arrange whatever assistance the family may need at that time.
3. The people who made the notification should be at the hospital.
4. A survivor should not be sedated unless medication is requested by the survivor, and a medical doctor administers.
5. Do not make idle promises to the family (i.e. "We'll promote him/her posthumously, etc.").
6. Arrangements should be made for transportation of the family back to their residence.
7. If applicable, arrangements should be made so that medical bills related to services provided are routed to the appropriate government agency for payment.

C. Family Support During the Funeral:

1. A Liaison Officer shall be appointed to assist the family as a facilitator between Grant County Fire District 3 and the family.
2. The Liaison Officer shall:
   a. Meet with the family and indicate what assistance Grant County Fire District 3 can offer if the family decides to have a "line-of-duty funeral".
   b. Know all information concerning the death and the continuing investigation to answer any family questions.
   c. Be available to the family during this time.
   d. Coordinate other family involvement with District involvement.

D. Providing Information and Assistance on Benefits to the Survivors:

1. A Benefits Coordinator should gather information on all benefits and reimbursements available to the family. This person should be responsible for filing the appropriate paperwork and following through with the family to ensure that benefits are being received.
2. If a possibility exists for coverage under the Federal Public Safety Officers Benefit, the Benefits Coordinator will immediately contact the Bureau of Justice, 631 Indiana Avenue NW, Washington D.C. 20531. Telephone number is 202-307-0635, fax 202-314-3965.
3. The Benefits Coordinator should visit with the surviving family to discuss the benefits they will receive within a few days following the funeral. A prepared printout of the benefits/funeral payments due the family, listing named beneficiaries, contacts at various benefits offices, and when they can expect to receive the benefits, should be given the family.
4. If there are surviving children from a former marriage, the guardian of those children should also receive a printout of what benefits the child(ren) will be receiving.
5. The Benefits Coordinator should pay special attention to the possibility of

revocation of health benefits to the surviving family. The vast majority of survivors are given a 30-day grace period before being canceled from the coverage or of being responsible for monthly payments for their coverage. Notify the appropriate insurance agency, i.e. Volunteer Pension System (if volunteer), to make application for death benefit.

6. If criminal violations surround the death or injury, the family should be informed of all new developments prior to any press release.
7. If there will not be any court proceedings surrounding the circumstances of the death, the District should relay all details of the incident to the family.

E. Continued Follow-up With the Family:

1. The District should be sensitive to the needs of the survivors other than the spouse. Adult-aged children or younger children, parents, siblings, etc. are all experiencing grief. Realize that grief is a process and that everyone handles grief differently. Do not set time limitations on when the family should "recover" from the death. The grief process has no timetable and many survivors may experience a complicated process. Research has shown that over 50% of surviving spouses develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress reaction to the tragedy. Too often public safety surviving families state they feel totally isolated by the District within a short time following the funeral. Death of the individual does not take away that love for the public safety profession that the entire family may feel.
2. Following are some suggestions that might be considered to help survivors feel a part of the family:
    a. When plaques/memorabilia are given to the surviving spouse, consider making the same available to the surviving parents. They have lost a child that can never be replaced. Remember to invite the surviving family to agency activities, they need the continued contact.
    b. Remember those children from a former marriage. Even though they did not live with the parent, they are nonetheless still that person's child. They too need personal memorabilia of their parent.
    c. Grant County Fire District 3 can easily keep in touch with monthly phone calls for the first year that can then be tapered off to quarterly. Co-workers can drop by from time-to-time, and the anniversary date of the person's death should be noted with a card. Remember, that for the first year at least, ALL anniversaries are difficult.
    d. Don't make idle promises to the surviving family, especially to the children; set specific times, dates, places and KEEP THEM.

F. Accident/Incident Investigation:

1. At the Scene:
   a. The first section of the form deals with protecting the accident scene. The area must be secured and not disturbed any more than is absolutely necessary. Custody must not be released to the owner until all investigations are completed. Even then still photographs and or videos should be taken of the scene. All clothing and equipment of the victim left at the scene must be located and impounded.
   b. All personnel who witness or who have information about the incident must be identified and instructed to prepare statements.
2. At the Hospital:
   a. Clothing and equipment must continually be impounded as it is removed at the hospital. In the case of on-duty death, it is critical that attending physician order toxicology studies. These studies should include exact percentages for blood alcohol and carbon monoxide levels. Blood samples should be obtained and stored at the lab until released by the Department of Justice. It may also be critical that the family allow an autopsy if requested. The reason for the tests and autopsy is for proper documentation for the public safety officer death benefit.
   b. The Department of Labor and Industries should be contacted immediately, and the District will cooperate with any investigation that they conduct.

See Appendix 04_03_11