

DEALING WITH DEATH

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Background

Small communities can be emotionally devastated after the loss of human life due to disasters. A community needs trained and experienced volunteers that have adequately prepared for the responsibility of giving aid to family, friends and neighbors. A community's emergency managers must make preparations for these community needs. Emergency managers should also have the skills needed to reach out with meaningful care if called to perform death notifications or grief management.

Plan Ahead for Support

Managing discussions about death is one of the most discomfoting challenges that can be faced during a career. It is sometimes considered a "soft" issue that is best handled by trained professionals. However, guidance has been sorely lacking for emergency managers who find themselves tasked with this duty. No one in these situations can be expected to be effective without appropriate tools or adequate training.

It is inevitable that there will be losses of life from disaster in every community. In order to prepare for grief counseling needs, the community emergency plan should have an established process for grief counseling to serve the community. This discussion provides information to help emergency managers prepare themselves and their communities for coming to terms with death and helping the survivors left behind.

Pre-Identify A Pool of Qualified Volunteers

The best practice for planning for grief counseling is to build a pool of local volunteers. The pre-identified pool should contain a variety of counseling skills. A general rule-of-thumb is to select mature individuals who have specific training in death notification and grief counseling. These could come from members of non-profit organizations (e.g., the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army), from trained grief counselors in local emergency response organizations (e.g., the chaplains of law enforcement or fire service), or local mental health professionals (government, universities/colleges, private practice). Some local faith-based organizations may also have specialists trained in grief counseling. Many large corporate concerns also have trained teams for their staff. These private sector specialists may be able to assist the community at large.

Since a major disaster may impact many in the community, a large pool of volunteers (more than 30) ensures that a team can be formed, as it is rare that everyone in a community will be directly involved with loss of life. The cost requirements for building these resources may be outside of a small community's budget. There may be grants

available from mental health organizations to help with the establishment, training and maintenance of the pool members.

Develop Procedures

Death notifications and grief counseling are activities that can be standardized to a degree with checklist and written guidelines. There are many organizations that can provide samples and ideas for these procedures, as well as training. A sampling of these organizations is provided at the end of this article. Team operations should be defined well in advance of disaster deployment. Teams may be called grief counselors, or incident stress teams, or simply death notification and counseling groups. Choose what best fits the needs of the community. Just ensure that team leadership, reporting structures, authorities, responsibility checklists, and training requirements are all clearly defined.

Each disaster response will be different. The procedures for death notification and grief counseling should provide guidance for selecting team members from the pool. Considerations might include needs for multi-lingual capabilities. There should also be guidance for needs unique to the survivor's ethnicity, religion, age and sex. Many incidents require a clerical figure or faith-based counselor familiar with the family. Sometimes an event requires co-workers of the deceased to join the team, or specialized assistance groups from other organizations, e.g., after a large airline accident. Avoid sending individuals simply because they hold a title, office or position. Verify with all volunteers that they actually have current professional grief counseling and death notification training. Exceptions should be made when the victim's family and friends request to join in the notification and counseling process.

Practice the Process

The volunteers will need experience working together before they respond to actual events. Since practicing with the bereaved is not appropriate, it may be best for the volunteers to meet, review tapes of situations that have been filmed, and discuss how they would address the situation. Simple scenarios can be built to discover volunteer's unmet needs. The community emergency managers need to be present for these discussions. Managers can give guidance in these trainings, if they have already completed death notification and grief counseling courses. If not, managers can gain a familiarity with the process by letting experienced volunteers lead the sessions. These sessions also provide the opportunity to evaluate and adjust current emergency procedures.

Establish Stress Management for Teams

Critical Incident Stress Management (**CISM**) debriefings are mandatory for the teams performing death notification and counseling, in order to reduce the risks of acquiring Critical Incident Stress Disorder (**CISD**). It is crucial that this step be in place and supported by designating community mental health professionals who have agreed to debrief teams. The debriefing specialists should also be a part of the volunteer pool. All

of the volunteers involved in grief counseling must be treated with the same concern and care as the surviving families. Their experiences and comments should be captured after an incident. These lessons learned can improve the community planning process.

Plan for Outside Assistance

Counseling resources outside the community should be considered for events that may overwhelm local resources. Identify resources available through local mutual aid. Additional sources may be found in State-level mental health offices, public health, fire, law enforcement and emergency medical services. Verify the kinds of support these external organizations can provide, their actual response time after notification, and what commitments can be made if there is a regional impact that includes their jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Mental health support must be provided for survivors when disasters cause a loss of human life in a community. Emergency managers should be able to quickly identify qualified grief counselors. This capability has proven useful in situations as diverse as school violence, sniper attacks, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes and aircraft crashes. Having preparations in place for death notification and grief counseling may be crucial for large-scale acts of terrorism. Emergency managers must also have some of the basic tools for assisting in these situations, when professional caregivers are not available, and the need is great or immediate.

Resources

One source every emergency manager should have in their working library is “Death Notification Procedures.” It provides clear, substantial guidance with many references for further support. It can be found at:
<http://www.cya.ca.gov/staff/death.html>

The brief list of organizations and websites below are just a few of the resources available for grief counseling training and team building. Contact the local offices of the organizations, when possible, or visit their websites for information.

Organizations

The American Red Cross Grief Counseling Program
<http://www.redcross.org>

The Salvation Army Grief Counseling Program
<http://www.salvationarmy.org>

Comfort for Kids, For Helping Grieving Children (especially after terrorist attack)
<http://www.mercycorps.org>

Critical Incident Stress Management Links
<http://www.cmcism.org/links.htm>

Documents

“Trauma, Death, and Death Notification,” Document NCJ 162360
Office of Violent Crimes Resource Center (U.S. Department of Justice)
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/ovc/publications/infores/death.htm>

*Death Notification: Breaking the Bad News with Concern for the Professional and
Compassion for the Survivor*
A Seminar Available from the Mothers Against Drunk Driving
<http://www.madd.org/home/>

Helping Children Cope with Terrorism
http://www.tpt.org/TPTspecial_edition/walsh.html