

Norfolk Insider

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“Death Notification” by Chief Shane Weidner



Death, as has been said, is a natural part of life. It can be expected or unexpected, peaceful or tragic. Either way, family and friends are always left behind. Often times when death is unexpected, public safety personnel are the first ones called. Although we deal with accidents, injuries, and death every day and are trained how to deal with these emergency situations, that training doesn't adequately prepare us how to tell someone they've lost their friend, wife, husband, or child. Training helps, but experience prepares.

It is one of the most difficult duties of the first responder. On the scene of a car accident, in the home of a heart attack victim, a suicide, or at the site of a disaster, many times there are loved ones who want to immediately know the status of their relative or friend and we are responsible for telling them.

There is no "good" way to hear "bad" news. Even though as a public safety officer I might see death fairly often, everyday citizens hopefully do not experience it much. So before talking to the family, I try my best to put myself in the family's position knowing this is a horrible time for them. I pray for strength, empathy and the right words.

When I go up to someone, introduce myself and tell them, "I have some bad news to tell you," I know their life is forever changed.

I am completely open and honest with them, often with tears in my eyes. I try to answer any and all questions they have. If the person is missing, I tell them what is being done to find them; if they are injured I tell them the seriousness, if they are dead, I am careful not to say "passed away" or "gone to a better place". I use the term "dead" so there isn't any misunderstanding about the status of their loved one. It is always a pivotal moment for the family. They will always remember who the public safety official was and what was said to them. The consideration we show for them and their loved one when we deliver that news is vital to starting them on the path of acceptance and healing.

We may not always say or do the right thing, as every person is different in how they accept bad news, but we do the best that we can. We wouldn't want any less consideration for our loved ones.