



# MILWAUKEE POLICE DEPARTMENT

## STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE

### 727 – DEATH NOTIFICATION

**GENERAL ORDER:** 2020-XX  
**ISSUED:** May 13, 2020

**EFFECTIVE:** May 13, 2020

**REVIEWED/APPROVED BY:**  
Assistant Chief Regina Howard  
**DATE:** April 10, 2020

**ACTION:** Amends General Order 2015-43 (September 9, 2015)

**WILEAG STANDARD(S):** NONE

#### **727.00 PURPOSE**

It is the purpose of this standard operating procedure to provide members with guidelines for notifying next of kin of the death of a family member.

#### **727.05 POLICY**

The notification of a death to the next of kin shall be carried out in a prompt, considerate, and professional manner in accordance with this standard operating procedure. Members assigned to the Criminal Investigation Bureau shall make death notifications if the death is the result of a homicide or deaths in which there are unexplained, unusual, or suspicious circumstances.

#### **727.10 DEFINITION**

##### NEXT OF KIN

The closest relative of the deceased (e.g., spouse, parents, siblings, significant others, children).

#### **727.15 INFORMATION GATHERING AND PREPARATION**

- A. Death notifications shall be delivered in person, except in rare circumstances, when exigency or other factors dictate notification by telephone. The reason for any telephonic notifications shall be explained in the notifying member's incident report. In most criminal cases where death is a result, the decedent will be taken for autopsy at a qualifying medical examiner's office. In other cases, the decedent will be taken to a licensed funeral home. Members shall make an effort to determine where the decedent was taken.
- B. Prior to contacting the next of kin members shall:
  - 1. Gather and familiarize themselves with essential details concerning the deceased person, to include full name, age, race, and home address, as well as details of the death, location of the body and personal effects, and other pertinent information;
  - 2. Ensure that the deceased has been positively identified; and

3. Identify the next of kin for the deceased person for purposes of notification, giving specific care to locate the closest relative starting with a spouse and followed by parents, siblings, and then children.
- C. Other relatives shall only be contacted when substantial delays would be required to make contact with the next of kin. Members shall contact a supervisor for guidance when in doubt concerning next of kin or delays in notification.
- D. Whenever reasonably possible, members shall gather readily available information concerning the survivors that may aid in the notification. This includes, but is not limited to, whether survivors are elderly, disabled, visually or hearing impaired, have medical problems, or do not speak English. If the survivor(s) have limited English proficiency (LEP) or are hearing impaired, the member shall request a qualified interpreter/translator in accordance with SOP 190 - Limited English Proficiency (LEP) / Hearing Impaired Persons.
- E. Members shall refer to SOP 570 - Public Information Policy regarding the release of information to the media about the identity of deceased persons.
- F. At least two members shall be assigned to conduct a death notification.
- G. Assigned members should request the assistance of a Crisis Intervention Team trained member when available.
- H. Assigned members shall ensure that each member is familiar with all pertinent information and decide who will be the primary spokesperson prior to making the notification. The other member(s) shall serve in an observer/support capacity.
- I. Assigned members shall determine if the deceased is at a medical examiner's office or where the deceased's body will be taken prior to notification. The assigned members shall provide this information to the next of kin.

### **727.20 NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES WITHIN MILWAUKEE COUNTY**

- A. A supervisor shall assign at least two members to make a death notification to the next of kin. Supervisors should attempt to assign members who have received training or have prior experience in providing death notifications. Supervisors shall attempt to assign these members to make the notification to the next of kin as soon as possible as the department is typically using social media, text messages, etc.

**Note: A supervisor from the Criminal Investigation Bureau shall assign at least two members to make a death notification to the next of kin if the death is the result of a homicide or deaths in which there are unexplained, unusual, or suspicious circumstances.**

- B. When the next of kin is in Milwaukee County, but outside of the city limits, the assigned members shall request approval from their shift commander to make the notification and notify the local police agency.

1. The local police agency may be able to provide additional information on the next of kin.
  2. The assigned members shall advise the agency of their estimated time of arrival and request their response.
- C. Upon arrival at the residence or place of business, members shall:
1. Check the accuracy of the location;
  2. Identify themselves by name, rank, and as a member of the Milwaukee Police Department;
  3. Ask permission to enter the residence, or in the case of a business or other location, move to a place of privacy;
  4. Request to speak to the immediate survivor;
  5. Verify the relationship of the survivor to the deceased.
- D. Every reasonable effort shall be made to make the death notification in the privacy of the survivor's home or in another location away from public scrutiny.
- E. Members shall determine if other members of the family are in the residence prior to making notification. Members may wish to bring them together for the notification, but should defer to the wishes of the immediate survivor. Members should consider advising survivors to sit prior to the notification, and younger children should not be present during the notification if possible.
- F. Members shall address survivor(s) in a straightforward manner and use easy-to-understand language to briefly explain the circumstances of the incident and the fact that the individual is dead.
1. Members should not use euphemisms such as "passed away" or "no longer with us" in order to avoid using the term "dead," as these expressions may create confusion or false hope.
  2. Members should not provide graphic aspects of the incident or the individual's death. Members should avoid the use of police jargon.
  3. Members should refer to the deceased in terms reflecting the deceased's relationship to the survivor (e.g., son, daughter).
  4. Whenever possible, a facial photograph should be taken of the deceased. Ideally the photograph should be taken in profile (side view) and changed to gray scale (black and white) to minimize the trauma to family members. The photograph can be taken by a forensic investigator who will accompany the officer(s)/detective(s) to make the notification.

- a. If there is facial and/or head trauma, identification may have to be made by fingerprints before the next of kin is notified.
  - b. In cases where the body is burned or decomposed, a photograph or fingerprints may not be possible. In these cases, a notification will need to be made using other investigative information. A DNA sample will need to be collected from the next of kin to compare to the deceased.
  - c. Advise the next of kin that there is a photograph that needs to be viewed to make a positive identification.
  - d. When using a photograph, advise the next of kin that it is believed that the deceased is their loved one and/or a family member.
  - e. The next of kin may want another person with them when the photograph is viewed.
  - f. Chaplains from the Salvation Army Chaplain's Program may be of assistance and comfort when making the notification.
  - g. The process and interaction with the next of kin shall be documented in a supplemental report in TriTech Inform RMS.
- G. Members should be prepared for unexpected responses from survivors to include fainting, distress, despondency, and possible verbal or physical assault. The observer/support member shall carefully monitor and assess the notification process and be prepared to call for additional resources (e.g., medical personnel, a family friend or relative, or additional officers) if necessary.
- H. Members shall provide survivors with sufficient time to regain composure following delivery of the death notice. Members should avoid attempts in the interim to provide comfort by using simple platitudes or trite phrases (e.g., "I know how you feel" and "I know how hard this is for you").
- I. Members shall avoid disclosing information during the notification that could jeopardize the investigative process.
- J. Members shall inform survivors that other department members may need to question them at a future time. If it is imperative that the survivors be questioned immediately after notification, questioning should be conducted compassionately.
- K. When the death occurs in a hospital and the next of kin or other family members are already present, it is the responsibility of the attending physician or other hospital designee to deliver the death notification. Members shall be available to provide basic information regarding the circumstances surrounding the death.
- L. Members shall not leave upon completion of the notification until reasonably assured that the survivor has adequate personal control, family or close friend(s) readily

available to provide support, or both. Members shall assess the physical and emotional well-being of the survivor(s) before departing, and members shall be reasonably assured that survivor(s) can take care of themselves and those for whom they may be responsible.

M. Members shall call the Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office at 414-223-1200 with the notification results to include who made the notification, date, time, and the name of the next of kin notified.

N. The details of the notification shall be documented in the applicable incident report.

### **727.25 NOTIFICATION PROCEDURES OUTSIDE MILWAUKEE COUNTY**

A. When next of kin are located outside of Milwaukee County, members shall contact the appropriate police agency and request that they conduct the notification in person and provide timely verification when the notification has been completed.

**Note: Members may notify next of kin living outside of Milwaukee County in person with the approval of their shift commander. Members shall make the notification pursuant to 727.20 upon receiving approval from their shift commander.**

B. District members shall contact their console operator and members assigned to the Criminal Investigation Bureau shall contact the Forensics Division and provide the following information to be forwarded to the notifying police agency through a teletype:

1. Name and address of the next of kin.
2. Name of the deceased.
3. Name and phone number of the investigating member and the district or division where the family may call for further information.

C. If the next of kin's police agency is unable to make the notification in a timely manner, the investigating member shall contact a supervisor for guidance.

D. The details of the notification shall be documented in the applicable incident report.

### **727.30 NOTIFICATION REQUESTS FROM OTHER AGENCIES**

A. Any member who receives a next of kin notification from another law enforcement agency shall advise the requesting agency to send a teletype request to the Forensics Division.

B. The Forensics Division shall then fax the request to the Technical Communications Division.

C. A Technical Communications Division supervisor shall then contact the appropriate

district or division to ensure a prompt notification is made pursuant to 727.20.



ALFONSO MORALES  
CHIEF OF POLICE

AM:mfk