

Law Enforcement

RESPONSE TO COMPLETED SUICIDE

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INTRODUCTION:

Law enforcement officers are often called to the scene to investigate situations involving unattended deaths or suspected suicides. The suicide of a young adult or prominent member of the community can have a profound impact across all segments of the community.

It is well documented that having known or been close to someone who takes their own life statistically increases the likelihood that an individual may also attempt suicide in the future. This increased risk level is true for both adults and teens. No one is exactly sure why the risk level increases, but one theory is that when one individual breaks a social taboo (like suicide) it makes it easier or more acceptable for others to do the same.

Sometimes communities experience multiple suicides in a short period of time. When this occurs, it is known as suicide contagion. How the community deals with a suicide can have a dramatic impact on contributing to, or preventing, suicide contagion. Following the steps in this protocol will help reduce the possibility that another suicide occurs in your school or community.

For law enforcement, responding effectively to these situations often extends well beyond the initial determination of death and involves maintaining a balance between sensitivity and presence in the community to assisting with maintaining the public safety. These protocols are offered as a guide to responding to these types of situations.

RESPONDING TO THE SCENE OF A SUICIDE OR UNATTENDED DEATH:

1. Determine whether medical aid can be rendered or make a determination that the subject is dead.
2. Anyone who discovers a body of a person who died an untimely or unattended death is mandated (RSA 611:4) to immediately report the death to the Medical Examiner and the County Attorney (have dispatch or the sheriff's department assist with these notifications).
3. Secure/preserve the scene.
 - a. Treat the scene as a crime scene.
 - i. Follow your own department protocols for contacting/involving investigators.
 - b. Keep all unauthorized people (including family/friends, and law enforcement not directly involved in the investigation) away from the body and rooms.
 - i. To the extent possible, be respectful of the family's privacy and conduct yourself in a serious and dignified manner.

- c. Protect potential evidence (until Medical Examiner or investigators arrive).
 - i. Do not move the body or anything in the room (per RSA 611:6).
 - ii. Observe possible means of death.
 - iii. Observe whether there is an obvious suicide note.
 - d. Observe possible sources of electronic evidence.
 - i. Avoid using the phone in the home. (Obtain last number called.)
 - ii. Is there a caller ID box?
 - iii. Messages on the answering machine?
 - iv. Is there a computer turned on and running? Let investigators look for emails and last websites, etc.
 - e. Interview family and friends.
 - i. If they were first on the scene, ask them if they removed anything from the room or moved anything.
 - ii. Ask if the person has been depressed or has expressed an intent to harm themselves.
4. The Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner is required to respond/investigate all suicides (RSA 611:3, II:b).
 5. Discuss your findings and observations with the County Attorney and Medical Examiner to see if a suspicious* death can be ruled out, or whether further criminal investigation is necessary.
 6. If further criminal investigation is indicated, immediately contact the Attorney General's office.
 - a. If you suspect the suicide may be related to a crime (e.g. suicide/homicide), involve the Attorney General's office immediately.
 7. If requested, assist the Medical Examiner with conducting an investigation and gathering information related to the suicide.
 - a. Photograph or videotape the body and scene before the body is removed.
 8. The Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner may have the body transported to a hospital morgue or funeral home for the purpose of conducting an external examination.
 9. If the cause and manner of death is clear (and there is no need for an autopsy):
 - a. The death certificate will be issued.
 - b. The Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner will make arrangements for transportation of the body (either to a funeral home or hospital morgue) according to the wishes of the family, or per RSA 611:5.
 10. The Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner (in consultation with the Chief or Deputy Medical Examiner and the County Attorney) will make the determination as to whether or not an autopsy needs to be conducted.
 11. If an autopsy is to be performed, the Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner will consult with the County Attorney to request authorization (payment) for the transport and autopsy.
 - a. If the County Attorney declines to authorize payment (no criminal intent suspected), then the Assistant Deputy Medical Examiner may proceed with the transport and bill the Attorney General's office.
 - a. Autopsies will be performed by the Chief or Deputy Medical Examiner at the state morgue at Concord Hospital.
 12. If there are family or next of kin present, inform them as to what is happening. (See "Notification of Next of Kin" below.) For example, "*The Deputy Medical Examiner has taken custody of the body. The Chief Medical Examiner or Deputy Medical Examiner will perform an autopsy at Concord Hospital and, they will be in touch with you when the autopsy is completed (w/in 24 hours).*" Or, "*the body has been moved to _____ funeral home and they are awaiting your further instructions.*"
 13. In accordance with your department/agency guidelines, document your response, information gathered, disposition, and outcome.

**Suspicious death = the witnessed or unattended death of any person that can not quickly and easily be identified as a natural, accidental, or suicidal death.*

NOTIFICATION OF NEXT OF KIN:

In most situations, law enforcement personnel have the most experience and training for notifying next of kin in the event of a suicide. Departments should have the Chief or his/her designee be responsible for death notifications, and this individual should have experience and training in this area. While the person doing the notification should maintain a professional demeanor, this does not necessarily mean not showing any emotion. Letting your humanity show eases a difficult situation both for you and the person you are notifying. The person doing the notification should be prepared for a wide range of emotions (all normal) from intense grief to anger to outright denial. Here are some general guidelines when notifying the next of kin of a suicide:

1. Make sure you have all of the information needed before notifying kin. This includes: cause, location and time of death, and any specific circumstances.
2. Be sure you have correctly identified the victim, as well as the next of kin who you will notify.
3. Notification should be done in person.
4. Bring another person with you, if possible. Two people are better able to handle the variety of situations that might be encountered. Take two cars so one person can stay longer, if needed, or can assist with transporting family to the funeral home. The second person could be:
 - a. Another officer (male/female combination, if possible).
 - b. Clergy (even if it is not known if the family has any religious affiliation).
 - c. A friend of the family.
5. Ask for the next of kin by name. ***Be certain who you are speaking with.***
6. Ask if you can come into the home.
7. Inquire if anyone else is home.
 - a. Determine who and their relationship with the deceased.
 - b. If other adults, gather them together (if indicated).
 - c. Specifically ask if children are home and be sensitive to their presence.
 - d. Ask if there is a private room where you can speak.
8. Have the person sit down before telling them. (This avoids injury if the person faints – which is not uncommon.)
9. Be direct.
 - a. Tell them *“I have very bad news; (name) has died. Or, “I am very sorry to inform you that (name) has died.”* Provide them with as much information as you have (how, where, when), but avoid giving them graphic details of the death or condition of the body.
 - b. If there was a suicide note that was blaming or harsh, summarize it for them rather than giving specific quotes.
 - i. If they ask to see the suicide note, provide them with a copy (or the original once the Medical Examiner has finished their investigation).
 - c. Ask if they have questions and answer all questions honestly.
10. Tell them what happens next. E.g. *“The Deputy Medical Examiner has taken custody of (use person’s name) body. The Chief Medical Examiner or Deputy will perform an autopsy and they will be in touch with you when the autopsy is completed (w/in 24 hours).”* Or, *“(Name) has been moved to _____ funeral home and they are awaiting your further instructions.”*
11. Do not leave the person alone.
 - a. Assist them with contacting a friend or relative and remain with them until that person arrives.
 - b. Victim’s Inc. in Rochester (355-7777) can be a resource in responding to families who have experienced the suicide of a loved one.
12. Use sensitivity and common sense about returning personal belongings to the family. You may want to do this at a later time or work with the Funeral Director to assist you with this.

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF CAUSE AND MANNER OF DEATH:

One difficult decision that police are often faced with is whether to disclose that the death is a suicide. The death of any community member under mysterious circumstances can create fear and panic in short order. This can be fueled by inaccurate (and sometimes absolutely baseless) rumor and innuendo. In this day of instant messaging,

email and cell phones, information can travel throughout a community at lightning speed. Further complicating this scenario is the fact that due to ignorance, stigma and fear, many families specifically request that the manner of death not be made public.

It is a myth that talking about suicide actually encourages people to kill themselves. Publicly disclosing that a death is a suicide gives schools and mental health professionals the ability to discuss the suicide openly and directly with youth and other community members and this can actually decrease the possibility of suicide contagion. Law enforcement officials should look at the issue as one of public safety, and in most circumstances, public disclosure will increase public safety (especially when educators, mental health providers, clergy, law enforcement, and other key members of the community work collaboratively on the issue). Some key points to consider when contemplating this decision are:

- Never promise the family that you will not disclose the manner of death.
 - Provide them with information (see Public Disclosure section below) about some of the positive reasons to disclose.
 - In small communities/rural areas, it can be difficult to respond if the family insists it is a secret. If pressured in this way, you can respond by playing good cop/bad cop and saying, “*We won’t disclose, but it is public record and the Medical Examiner’s office will, if questioned.*” (see below)
- The **cause** (e.g. overdose, gunshot) and **manner** (e.g. suicide or accident) is a matter of public record (listed on the death certificate – RSA 611:5). Any information on the death certificate will be disclosed (if requested) by the Medical Examiner’s office.
- You should be very cautious about disclosing the manner of death without an official determination by the Medical Examiner’s office.
- In many cases, the Medical Examiner will certify the death immediately (and thus the information is available to the public).
- In cases involving an autopsy, the death certificate will typically be completed within 24 hours.
- In cases involving suspected overdoses, poisoning, drugs or alcohol, or other situations requiring a toxicology test/report, the death certificate may not be finalized until test results are returned (often 6-8 weeks after the death).
- Be prepared for responding to media inquiries.
 - Inappropriate media reports can significantly contribute to suicide contagion.
 - You may wish to refer to the guidelines (in the Appendix section) for how to deal with the media (or share these guidelines directly with the media).
 - You might also partner (in advance) with the community mental health center or other social service agency that might be willing to officially handle media contact in the event of a suicide.
 - Do not disclose any other (protected) information to media about a juvenile not related to the death. (e.g. “*He was well known to us.*” Or, “*We have responded to that address many times.*”)
 - You can defer all media inquiries to the Medical Examiner’s office (603) 271-1235.

NOTIFICATION OF OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS/ORGANIZATIONS:

The suicide of a young person or prominent member of the community can have a ripple effect throughout the community. Many community agencies and organizations are unable to share information due to confidentiality regulations and constraints. Police typically do not have these same restrictions and can play a key role in quickly assisting community support systems to mobilize and prepare to help young and old deal with the grief and range of emotions that follow a suicide. In this day of rapid communication, word will spread very quickly (especially among youth). It is important that support systems be able to communicate just as quickly.

A few things to consider:

- Confidentiality restrictions placed on police are limited to juvenile matters such as delinquency, abuse, neglect, truancy, and running away and are protected under (see RSA: 169C:25 and D25).
 - This does not include suicide.

- If you do disclose information, limit it to the facts regarding the death.
- Do not provide information such as: *“He was well known to us.”* Or, *“We have responded to that address many times.”*
- Information regarding juvenile matters is protected under RSA 169C:25 and D:25.
This protection does not end at death.
- One form of communication is a professional courtesy (confidential) call between the Chief and other key community members (e.g. school superintendent or principal).
- Another form of communication might be a group email. (You may want to gather addresses or lists in advance.)
- A pre-arranged phone tree can also be a useful tool.
- The communication can be extremely brief: *“We want to let you know that a 17 year-old youth in our community died at home of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.”*
- Or it may offer less details such as *“We want to let you know about the unexpected death of a 17 year-old in our community and we are informing you so you can prepare your staff; he was found at his home and foul play has been ruled out.”*
 - Including person’s name and cause and manner of death is acceptable. (OK to disclose the information listed on the death certificate.)
- Organizations you might consider notifying include:
 - Superintendent or principal of schools
 - Community mental health centers
 - Police departments in surrounding towns (e.g. school district)
 - Clergy/faith-based communities
 - Teen drop-in centers
 - Local hospital emergency rooms
 - Local physicians or medical clinics
 - Other social service agencies
 - Division of Children, Youth and Families (if indicated)
 - District Court/Probation and Parole (if indicated)

RESPONDING TO THE COMMUNITY IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING THE SUICIDE:

Particularly for youth suicides, there can be tremendous fallout in the community in the days and weeks following the suicide. Oftentimes, these incidents result in dramatically increased use of alcohol and other drugs, as well as increased acting out and risky behaviors by teens and young adults. Males are especially vulnerable to acting out their sadness and rage in ways that bring them into increased contact with law enforcement personnel. Striking a balance between insuring the public safety and assisting youth through this grieving process can be difficult.

- Include notification of the suicide in shift change information so that all members of the department will be aware of the situation.
 - Discuss potential hot spots or places where youth are likely to congregate.
 - Be aware that males in particular are likely to have difficulty dealing with their grief and may display their emotions through anger, rage, and reckless behavior.
 - Discuss hypothetical situations and discuss how you might handle youth who are acting out (verbal warning vs. arrest vs. protective custody vs. look the other way).
- Use whatever resources and information you have to gauge the sentiment in the community.
- School Resource Officers can be particularly helpful during this time by providing a link between the student body and the police department.
 - Find out how the department can assist them and/or the school during this period.
- Contact the Funeral Director and ask how you can help. Offer to have a cruiser present to direct traffic for the wake or funeral. (This offers law enforcement an obvious presence with a defined role.)
- Consider having the School Resource Officer and/or other police officers attend the wake to pay their respect to the family and to support youth who may be particularly vulnerable or at risk.

- Remember that although the most obvious period of grief will be during the wake/viewing or memorial service/funeral, the grief period (and possible high-risk youth behaviors) will last weeks and months rather than days and weeks.

Law Enforcement Officers die by suicide at a rate that is estimated to be two to three times higher than the general population. Over 450 police officers die by suicide in the United States each year. This is three times higher than the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty each year. As first responders, law enforcement officers are frequently exposed to gruesome crime and accident scenes including suicides and attempted suicides. They are also frequently in situations in which their own lives are in danger. Exposure to these types of situations result in very high rates of depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among law enforcement officers. These disorders frequently go unrecognized and untreated and are an underlying cause of the high suicide rate. Make sure your department fosters an environment that promotes good self care skills and seeking treatment for depression and PTSD. Keep your partner safe – Recognize and Connect!

RESOURCES:

Tears of a Cop is a law enforcement specific website that has information about the impact to police to responding to traumatic events. Information is included about PTSD, depression, and suicide of police officers. There are articles, memorials, links, a chat board, and other information. <http://www.tearsofacop.com/index6.html>

Real Men Real Depression provides facts about depression in males in the United States. Additional information, including a printable brochure, can be found at http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov/cic_text/health/realmen-depression/realmen-depression.htm.