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Death Notification

Common Reactions of Children

It is nearly impossible to predict how a child will respond to the news that a family member has died. Children who are present during the notification will have varied reactions depending on their age and maturity, relationship to the deceased and prior experience with loss. For many children, this may be their first experience dealing with loss. It is not uncommon for children to express guilt or fear by stating that they are somehow responsible for the death. Other common reactions will be for children to act younger than their age, to react as if nothing has happened, to become quiet and withdrawn or fearful and anxious. For example, they may cling to the NOK and cry if asked to leave their side. They may become angry, have a temper tantrum or attempt to hit someone or throw things. Children may become highly active, talking non-stop, interrupting conversations, asking questions, or running around the room. Younger children are not likely to have the cognitive capacity to appreciate the permanence of the death.

Guidelines on How NOK Should Notify Children

The NOK may ask for advice on how to communicate with the children. In general, it is best to tell children as soon as possible after a secure and safe environment is available. Guidelines depend upon the age of the child, however a few general suggestions for the parent include:

1. Sit close to the child at eye level;
2. Use language appropriate to their age and maturity;
3. Check if the child understands what has happened by asking questions;
4. Answer questions honestly; and,
5. Provide reassurance that they are safe; it is sometimes helpful for children to have familiar toys to play with or a blanket to cuddle to feel more secure.

Death notification is a difficult and heart-wrenching task that affects officers who are new to this duty as well as those who have more experience. This is especially true in notification scenarios that involve children. It is important to acknowledge the challenges of this job, but it is equally important to know that the DoD community and the nation appreciates and respects this important role in what is a delicate and essential part of military service and life.

Understanding Children's Grief and Bereavement

Children are likely to be powerfully affected by the deaths of loved ones, but may be less able to express confusing thoughts and feelings in words. While many children may express feeling sad, cry or become more withdrawn, others will express their emotions through behaviors that may be regressed, reverting back to earlier behaviors. Infants and toddlers are likely to experience the death through the emotional responses or change in availability of the important adults in their lives. Very young children can demonstrate changes in sleeping or eating patterns or develop tantrums or overactive behavior.

School aged children may express emotional concerns through physical complaints such as stomachaches or headaches. Teenagers often wish to present themselves as independent and not in need of adult help. Their sullenness or seeming disconnectedness should not be mistaken for a lack of emotional response to a death. Behavioral changes in any grieving child are better viewed as due to emotional responses rather than disciplinary problems.

Children's Understanding of Death

It is important to appreciate how children of different ages understand and may react to their parent's death. This information can be helpful to you and the next of kin.

Ages 0–3

Children younger than 3 do not understand the concept of death, but toddlers can understand the notion of 'here' and 'not here'. Children of this age are very aware of the emotional reactions of their caretaker and will react to the NOK's level of distress. Children of this age experience anxiety if separated from their caretakers. They do not need verbal explanations, so much as needing to be held by and close to their caretakers and maintaining a normal routine.

Ages 3–7

Children at this stage have limited understanding and need to be told that death is permanent. Simple facts should be explained such as who died, where and how. They understand that the body stops functioning when a person dies, but may need help to fully understand what that means. Examples of ways to explain death include, "Daddy no longer sees, hears, eats, talks or moves." Likening death to the death of a pet can also be helpful. It is unwise to tell children that the deceased is sleeping or resting because the child may interpret this literally causing them to be confused and fearful.

Ages 7–11

At this stage, children need to be told more facts of who has died, where, how and when. It is important to use (and continue to use) the word, 'died' to explain what happened and to encourage children to express their feelings. Children at these ages have better understanding of the permanence of death and will react with many questions and may become very emotional. Because children may react in unpredictable ways, it is important to allow their emotional response and accept it without judgment.

Adolescents and Older

Explain the death at the level of an adult. Because adolescents understand abstract concepts like death, they are likely to ask more questions which their caretakers, and those who assist, may not have answers to. It is okay to say, "I don't know" when there is no explanation or if you lack information to answer their questions. Because teenagers seek to express their independence from family and their reliance on peers, it is only natural that they will experience conflict around autonomy and a need for more dependence on their family at this time. It is important to acknowledge the unique developmental needs of adolescents and give them comfort as well as personal space.

Warning Signs

Warning signs that may indicate a child is struggling and may need professional help include:

- Frequent bedwetting
- Physical complaints (nausea, headaches, difficulty sleeping or nightmares)
- Poor eating habits
- Spending more time alone

- Refusal to go to school or leave their caregiver
- Exaggerated feelings, blame, guilt, or aggressive outbursts
- Making comments about hurting themselves or actually hurting themselves (cutting, scratching, biting or accident prone behavior)

Important adults in children's lives such as teachers, coaches, and clergy should know about the family's loss so that they too can attend to and provide support for grieving children.

Children's Involvement in the Funeral

Families must decide to what extent and whether they will incorporate military traditions into their loved one's funeral, and importantly if and how their children should participate. This may be a child's first exposure to a funeral. Military caskets, the firing of weapons, and the folding of flags can all spark curiosity, interest and sometimes confusion and fear as well. Families typically have routines and traditions that can be helpful in the days leading up to and following a funeral.

Children can prepare for funerals, like other important events, with attention to the details of selecting clothing, polishing shoes, getting personal items together.

While funerals are a time of family pain, they are also a time of family gathering. Contact with other family members and close friends before, during and after the ceremony can be reassuring to children and demonstrate that sadness does not need to be borne alone. Parents and caring adults should help children understand what they are likely to see as people mourn.

Allow children to be children. Their participation and activities during the funeral service may vary depending upon their age. Some young children may appear to be uninvolved or run around and be disruptive. A funeral is not the appropriate time to discipline children.

It is best to allow children to establish their own level of comfort and involvement in funeral services.

Gentle adult reassurance can be very helpful. However, it is inadvisable to force children to attend viewings or funeral services when they demonstrate significant discomfort. Parents and other adults should be prepared to reopen discussions about the funeral with children after the funeral service is completed. Because military deaths during wartime are often of public interest, family privacy around grieving may be diminished. It is important to protect children from disturbing media exposure. Reserve and National Guard families or those living outside of military communities may find that their grief is less well understood by the civilian community.

New Benefit Initiative: Heirloom Personal Effects Chest

1. Background: The Secretary of the Army has approved the Heirloom Chest as a benefit for Soldiers and selected Department of the Army Civilians (see paragraph 4) to be provided when transferring a deceased soldier's or civilian's personal effects (PE) to the person eligible to receive the personal effects (PERE). This benefit is derived from the Army's authority to collect and return a person's PE codified in Title 10 United States Code. At this time only one Heirloom Chest is authorized per decedent. However there is pending legislation that may authorize additional chests on the same basis as the interment flag and flag case. Subsequent guidance will be provided should the legislation be approved.



2. Recipients: The Heirloom Chest is to be delivered to the PERE in the same manner and basis as the PE. Note: ownership of the Heirloom Chest is not vested with the PERE. The Heirloom Chest is subsequently transferred by the PERE to the person receiving the PE in accordance with State law. At this time, there is no authorization to provide the Heirloom Chest to anyone other than the PERE, i.e., no other family members are authorized an Heirloom Chest.

3. Description: The Heirloom Chest is a quality wooden chest for storing and protecting the deceased Soldier's uniform, award citations, official Army letters and other documents and Army sentimental memorabilia contained in his/her personal effects (PE). The chest is rectangular and approximately 33L x 14H x 15D in size with a capacity of 17.5 gallons. It has a hinged childproof lid with a removable tray deep enough to store the flag case, if so desired. The chest is lockable, but is configured to preclude a child from sealing itself inside and suffocating. A premium quality brass medallion of the Army seal is affixed to the exterior lid. Two brass handles of the same color as the Army seal are secured to each end of the chest. The interior of the lid is a black velvet or Velcro friendly insert suitable for displaying rank insignia, awards, skill badges and/or other memorabilia from the Soldier's PE. The chest will be constructed of a number one common or better solid hardwood species, such as walnut, cherry, or Honduras mahogany.

4. Eligibility: The Heirloom Chest will be provided to the PERE for those soldiers who die while on active duty and for those civilians whose death is incident to injuries incurred in connection with the employee's service with an armed force in a contingency operation, or who dies of injuries incurred in connection with a terrorist incident occurring during the employee's service with an armed force. The eligible recipients have been divided into three categories of deaths based upon funding and logistical requirements: Current Non-theater Deaths, Current Theater (OIF/OEF) Deaths, and Retroactive (includes both theater and non-theater). Guidance for procurement and distribution of the Heirloom Chest is different for each of the categories and is explained below.

5. Procurement:

- a. Current Non-theater Deaths. The Heirloom Chest for current Non-theater deaths are procured by the home-station Casualty Assistance Center (CAC) using the Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Open Allotment. The CAC may purchase the Heirloom Chest at time of need from the manufacturer (a Blanket Purchase Agreement [BPA] is currently being prepared) for delivery directly to the summary court martial officer (SCMO) appointed for the disposition of PE. The CAC, based upon expected shipping times, availability of an adequate secure storage and anticipated usage, may keep a minimal stock of Heirloom Chests on hand.
- b. Current Theater (OIF/OEF) Deaths. The Heirloom Chests for current theater deaths are procured by the Joint Personal Effects Depot (JPED) using Global War on Terrorism funding. The JPED will maintain a supply of HPECs based upon their available secure storage and anticipated usage.
- c. Retroactive Deaths. The HPEC for retroactive deaths are procured by the Casualty and Mortuary Affairs Operations Center (CMAOC) using Secretary of the Army funds. Heirloom Chests for retroactive deaths will be procured in accordance with a manufacturer production plan and distributed directly to the appointed CAO based upon a CMAOC delivery plan.
- d. Cross leveling of Heirloom Chests by CACs, JPED, and CMAOC is expressly prohibited. The source of Heirloom Chest funding source for each category is unique and usage of the funds for other than the intended purpose is illegal. Exceptions may not be approved.

6. Heirloom Chest Distribution

- a. Current Non-theater Deaths. The Home Station CAC will provide the Heirloom Chests to the appointed summary court martial officer (SCMO) for the disposition of personal effects. The SCMO will deliver the chest directly to the PERE when the PERE resides within the local area of the installation. When the PERE does not reside within the local area of the installation, the SCMO will include the Heirloom Chests with the PE that is shipped.
- b. Current Theater (OIF/OEF) Deaths. The JPED will ship the Heirloom Chest with all of the Soldier's theater PE to the Casualty Assistance Officer (CAO) for delivery to the PERE.

Heirloom Chest Retroactive Policy Statement

On September 28, 2007 the Army began delivering the Heirloom Chest pictured here to the Person Eligible to Receive the Effects of Soldiers who died while in an active duty status. Some survivors who lost a loved one before September 28, 2007 have asked if they could also receive one of these heirloom chests. Currently, the Army has not received the authority to issue the chests retroactively. This may change in the future. CMAOC will let you know as soon as the Army receives this authority.

Family Funeral Travel Update

1. The Army is authorized, by Title 37, United States Code section 411f, to provide Family Funeral Travel to a Soldier's burial service. This statute has been revised several times over the last few years, most recently by Public Law 110-181-January 28, 2008 122 STAT. 3. This article consolidates the legislation and provides the Army's current Family Funeral Travel policy.

2. The Army may provide round trip travel and transportation allowances to:

- a) The surviving spouse (including a remarried surviving spouse) of the deceased Soldier.
- b) The children of the deceased Soldier (including stepchildren, adopted children and illegitimate children) regardless of age.
- c) The parents of the deceased Soldier and the parent's of the Soldier's spouse. The statute defines "parent" as a natural parent of the member; a stepparent of the member; and any other person, including a former stepparent, who has stood in loco parentis to the member at any time for a continuous period of at least five years before the member became 21 years of age. Additionally this definition includes a parent of the member by adoption; a parent, stepparent, or adopted parent of the spouse of the member.
- d) The siblings of the deceased member regardless of age.
- e) The person authorized to direct the disposition (PADD) of the deceased member's remains. Also, when the deceased Soldier's remains are commingled and included in a group burial; the person who would have been the PADD had individual identification been made.
- f) If no one described in subparagraphs a through d above is provided travel and transportation allowances; the travel and transportation allowances may be provided to no more than two other persons closely related to the deceased member and who are selected by the PADD. A person provided travel and transportation allowances under this paragraph is in addition to the person referred to in paragraph e above.

5. The Army may also provide round trip travel and transportation allowances to an attendant who accompanies an authorized traveler to the burial ceremony when the CDR AHRC (AHRC PDC-C for current deaths or AHRC-PDC-M for prior conflict deaths) determines that the accompanied authorized

traveler is unable to travel unattended because of age, physical condition, or other justifiable reason; and there is no other authorized traveler who can serve as the attendant.

6. Travel and transportation allowances are limited to travel and transportation to the burial location. Per diem is limited two days at the burial location and the time necessary for such travel. Accordingly per diem will normally be paid for four days and three nights (day of travel to the burial location, the day before and the day of the burial, and the day of travel home). However some international travel will require additional travel days and the associated per diem.

7. From time to time Congress changes the statutes that authorize travel. At this time, CMAOC is aware of at least one pending change to the statute. Do not be surprised if you receive an update to this update in the new future.

New AR Authorizes Legal Assistance for Minor Survivors

A recent policy change now ensures that minor beneficiaries of deceased Soldiers are allowed legal assistance to assist in financial matters relating to the death of their Service Member. A letter from the Legal Assistance Policy Division states the AR 27-3 authorizes Legal Assistance attorneys to assist fiduciaries acting on behalf of minor survivors of deceased military personnel in seeking guardianships, establishing trusts or other necessary actions to facilitate disbursement of military death benefits. The Office of The Judge Advocate General offers this benefit to survivors.

Presidential Memorial Certificates Available for Families of Deceased Veterans

Presidential Memorial Certificates are available for the family members and loved ones of deceased veterans. A Presidential Memorial Certificate (PMC) is an engraved paper certificate, signed by the current President, to honor the memory of honorably discharged deceased veterans.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) administers the PMC program through the National Cemetery Administration. The VA prepares the certificates which bear the President's signature expressing the country's grateful recognition of the veteran's service in the United States Armed Forces.

Eligible recipients include the deceased veteran's next of kin and loved ones. Up to 20 certificates may be provided in each individual deceased veteran's name. There is no charge. Eligible recipients, or someone acting on their behalf, may apply for a PMC in person at any VA regional office or by U.S. mail only. Requests cannot be sent via email.

There is no form to use when requesting a PMC. A written request is required and a copy of the veteran's discharge and death certificate must be enclosed. Please submit copies only, as the VA cannot return original documents. Certificates take between 30-45 days to receive by mail.

If you would like to request a Presidential Memorial Certificate, there are two options. Either:

1. Fax your request and all supporting documents (copy of discharge and death certificate) to: (202) 565-8054, or
2. Mail your request and all supporting documents using either the U.S. Postal Service or a commercial mail service, such as one of the overnight or express mail delivery services, to:

Presidential Memorial Certificates (41A1C) Department of Veterans Affairs
5109 Russell Road
Quantico, VA 22134-3903

If you have any questions about the program in general, a certificate you have received, or a request you have already sent in, you may call the Presidential Memorial Certificate Program directly at: (202) 565-4964. Or email questions to the VA's website at www.va.gov.

Sources that can help you

1. **Department of Veterans Affairs - offers free bereavement counseling** – call 202-273-9116 between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. (Eastern) Monday – Friday for more information or visit their website at http://www.va.gov/RCS/Bereavement_Counseling.asp.
2. **Military One Source** - provides services to military families for a variety of needs such as counseling, career development, financial concerns, children, substance abuse, transitioning to civilian life, elderly care, and more. Visit www.militaryonesource.com or call 1-800-342-9647 to learn more. **Military One Source offers a free copy of Military Widow** to spouses or other Family members of fallen service members through phone orders only. A survivor can request a copy by calling 1-800-342-9647.
3. **National Suicide Prevention - is a 24-hour, toll-free suicide prevention service available to anyone in suicidal crisis.** If you need help, please dial 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You will be routed to the closest possible crisis center in your area. There are more than 120 crisis centers across the country. You can also get information online at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.
4. **Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)** - provides a support network for the surviving Families of those who have died in service to America. For more information visit them online at www.taps.org or call 1-800-959-TAPS (8277) 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
5. **TriCare / Humana Military - covers the cost of eight counseling sessions**, and more are available with a physician's referral. Contact your regional TriCare office for more information or visit them at www.tricare.mil and <http://www.humana-military.com>.