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SUPPORT FOR CASUALTY NOTIFICATION OFFICERS

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This document was created for Casualty Notification Officers (CNOs) preparing to notify family members that a military member has been wounded or died.

Our goals are:

- 1) to assist you in preparation for the notification;
- 2) to help you anticipate what you may experience as a result of the notification; and
- 3) to provide you with resources you can use, if needed.

Preparing for Notification

Although you have received casualty notification procedure training, it is normal to feel apprehensive as you approach the time to carry out this duty. The following are suggested principles to help you prepare yourself mentally and emotionally for the notification task.

Training

Training is a key component of effective and well-delivered notifications.^{7,9} To prepare well, you may want to review your training materials and think about what you will say and even discuss it with another CNO or chaplain before the notification occurs. Links to additional training materials can be found at the end of this document.

“For many CNOs or officers who are appointed to do this notification many of them say it is the most difficult thing they’ve had to do in their service career and the most important. And I think in many ways having a formula, a ritual, something that gives the notification officer a formula for presenting the news it helps, it really helps the notification officer stay focused.”¹

-U.S. Army Chaplain

“I was initially somewhat resentful that I had to deal with the death of someone else’s loved one that I didn’t even know; however, I got over this later...”²

-Casualty Assistance Officer

Personal Reactions

CNOs report that one of the biggest struggles during notification is attempting to convey compassion toward the family while still remaining professional. One way for you to find this balance is to consider your own experience with loss and grief. Many CNOs are surprised at how personal a notification can be for them. If you have previously suffered the loss of a loved one, you may find yourself

identifying with the casualty’s family. Be aware that this may bring up your own feelings of grief and sadness over the loss of your loved one. For the duration of the notification, focus on the matter at hand. Come back to your own experiences after the notification is over.

“There’s a military aspect to this but frankly when people fall this is a human business and we can’t escape that.”¹

-Casualty Assistance Officer

“It was heart wrenching, but I felt it was a duty that probably had the greatest importance of just about anything I ever had to do and I did it with the greatest amount of feeling that I could without, I guess, you know it sounds strange but without becoming emotionally involved.”¹

-Retired Casualty Notification Officer from Vietnam era

At times when you are with a family during notification, you may identify strongly with the reaction they are having to the news. You might relate their experience to your own losses. At these times it can be very tempting to begin disclosing your personal story of loss. While this may seem like a good way to help the family feel that you understand, it is not appropriate to share personal details. Instead, consider using statements that are honest and heartfelt, but general in nature. For example, you could mention “I realize this is a very hard time for you” or “I know this must be difficult and I’m sorry.”

Next-of-kin reactions

You may be concerned about the emotional reaction of the family members, which is hard to predict when you do not know the fallen service member or their family.⁹ It may be helpful for you to plan ahead and think about what you will do and how you will react to various scenarios. For example, what will you do if the person (or persons) becomes angry or violent? How will you react if

the individual(s) begins crying? Planning ahead may help you to reduce feelings of anxiety that you may experience going into the situation.

“I have a son, so I’m trying to put myself in their shoes. I ask myself, if someone were to knock on my door and say, ‘Your son is never coming home again,’ how would I feel?”³

-Casualty Notification Officer

“Some people are very quiet; some get angry at you. You’re standing there in your uniform. They want to take it out on you.”⁴

-Casualty Notification Officer

Treat the next-of-kin as you would want to be treated. It may help the next-of-kin feel more at ease with you if you sit down, lean in and make eye contact. If you are unsure about what to do, ask. “What can I do? Is there someone I can call?” If you are unsure what is appropriate, ask. “It seems like you could use some comfort. Would it be okay to put my hand on your shoulder?” Links to additional information about responding to next-of-kin reactions can be found at the end of this document.

“The training I got told me what you need to say, in a set pattern. I was worried about how to say the words without sounding like a heartless robot... You ask yourself, if she falls apart, what will you do? The chaplain asked if there was anyone we could call... The chaplain held her hand and said a prayer. Afterward I thought, did I do enough, did I do it the right way?”⁷

-Casualty Notification Officer

After Notification

After you’ve completed the notification process you may be left feeling many emotions. Based on research with other CNOs, some common emotional reactions are:

- Sadness for the family or remembering your own losses;
- Guilt about having to deliver the bad news;
- Anger about the loss of a fellow serviceman/woman;
- Ambivalence about how the notification went;
- Stress from thinking about death or mortality and imagining “what if this has to be done for me/my family?”;
- Relief that the task is over;
- Pride that you did your duty honorably and represented the Service.

“You realize the same thing could happen to you. Two officers could walk up to your parents’ house and inform them you’re dead.”⁵

-Casualty Notification Officer

“As any officer or enlisted person who has done a casualty notification can testify, it is an anxiety-ridden, emotional task.”⁵

-Casualty Notification Officer

“I know from many times of walking back out from the front door to the car and sitting there with the officer and just collecting our thoughts and remembering what’s happened, it affects all of us very deeply.”¹

-U.S. Army Chaplain

Many CNOs have said that they never forget the experience of giving a notification. At first you may replay the events in your mind. Some CNOs question whether they could have done anything differently.

“They train us as warriors. They don’t teach us how to take the pain away.”⁶

-Marine Staff Sgt.

“While I was in the house I saw his [the casualty’s] photo. I kept asking myself, did I know him? Did he do something stupid [such as pick up an unexploded bomb]? How is the wife going to get along? I went home and just watched TV for two hours. I had a lot of trouble sleeping that night. I was wondering, could I have done something else to make it less painful for her? I just kept going over it again in my mind.”⁷

-Casualty Notification Officer

“I remember every single one. I remember every single phone call at 4:30 in the morning. I remember driving to every single house. I remember once going to a place in what would have been an idyllic, Robert Frost snowfall into Southern New Hampshire and knowing that on this beautiful day I was going to be destroying some family’s lives.”¹

-Retired Casualty Notification Officer from Vietnam era

Coping

People cope with their feelings in various ways. After the notification you may find it helpful to talk about it, especially if you identified with the family or it brought up memories of your losses. Consider speaking with a chaplain or a community religious leader. Talk with someone

or even write it out in a journal. Some CNOs find it helpful to talk about their experience with a parent, spouse or partner. If this is something you think you might do, here are some things to consider:

1. Hearing about your experience delivering a death notification may result in your spouse or partner imagining what it would like be to be on the receiving end. As one wife of a Navy mortuary worker stated in the wake of the USS Iowa tragedy: “I became quieter and extra concerned that I could lose my fiancé at any time...when another military member is killed you always feel some involvement. There is a feeling of loss.”⁸
2. However, sharing the experience with your spouse/partner could also have positive effects, such as strengthening the relationship. Another Navy wife stated, “I have

been able to get to know another side of my husband’s emotions and personality. I have come to understand his thoughts, feelings, and his reasons for volunteering and working several days straight in the mortuary. I feel positive about my husband’s heroic abilities and talents which he used and was able to demonstrate during that time.”⁸

If you do not feel comfortable speaking to your spouse, talk to a close friend, or a counselor, therapist, or other mental health professional that can help you resolve any residual emotions. This is especially important if you aren’t feeling better within about two weeks. If you choose to not talk about your experience, consider relieving some stress by working out, going for a walk or run, or engaging in some other productive physical activity.

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Specific suggestions for handling grief reactions

<https://elearning.ucsf.edu/p70786104/>

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