



Guidelines on Notifying Families of Dead or Missing Loved Ones

This document is written for leaders, health care providers, and disaster workers who assist local and national authorities following natural disasters, terrorist actions, or other events that result in large numbers of dead, injured, and missing persons.

In a natural disaster of great magnitude and scope, multiple countries are directly affected and many nations' citizens from outside the region are killed or missing. In such an event, providing information to families whose loved ones are missing is accomplished by government organizations (including embassies, state department consular staff, and military services) as well as a number of non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross. Nations have different organizations that are likely to be involved. Procedures for notification of the next of kin when a family member or loved one is missing or has been confirmed dead are usually highly structured, formal and depend on the particular citizen's country's laws, customs, procedures, and traditions.

Non-local disaster workers will be most successful when acting through local authorities. In the absence of official authorities, guidance can be sought from local personnel who hold a respected place in the affected communities. Local officials should perform the notification whenever possible. Local customs will usually dictate who does the informing, who in the family is informed, documentation of the circumstances of the death (manner and cause of death, condition and location of the remains) and actions yet to be taken, if any, before the body is returned to the family.

When a person is missing, the following information will help authorities to communicate with family members: the circumstances at the disaster site, status of efforts to recover bodies, and how remains will be returned. Do not offer guarantees about the time required or assurances that a body will be recovered.

The following Dos and Don'ts are general recommendations for those who assist local and national authorities following mass death.

DO:

- Educate yourself on local attitudes and beliefs regarding death and the dead
- Locate local authorities who can inform you about customs and procedures and introduce yourself. These are important relationships that facilitate the work.
- Determine the type and location of local/national/international sources of assistance to the families
- Be sensitive and consider that cultural and religious beliefs about post-mortem examination of the dead vary widely. Be prepared to explain why special procedures such as autopsies may be necessary.

DON'T:

- Inform anyone outside of local authorities or the family of the death. Your local contacts can help you determine who are the appropriate family members to inform.
- Offer information, goods, or services that you cannot deliver or confirm
- Institute procedures that conflict with local customs
- Tell the news media names of victims, circumstances of death, or condition of bodies

For personnel who are participating in the actual notification of family members

DO:

- Make sure you are speaking to the appropriate next of kin
- Make the notification in person and in a private area with all parties seated whenever possible.
- Be accompanied by clergy or other appropriate sources of spiritual support
- Inform in a simple, measured straight forward fashion (e.g. "I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you.

Continued on reverse side

(pause) As you know there has been a (disaster) in ____
. (pause). Your _____ has died. (Your _____ is missing
and presumed dead).”

- Be warm, compassionate, and prepared for intense feelings. Comments such as “I am so sorry” or “I know this is very hard” are helpful.
- Answer all of the questions that you can simply and honestly.
- Ask if the survivor has another family member or friend who can stay and help with the initial adjustment
- Inform the family of additional people to contact and who will contact them regarding disposition of remains.

DON'T:

- Offer clichés such as “Things will get better” or “I’m sure it will all work out”.
- Offer false assurances such as “The embassy will take care of everything,” or “I’m sure you’re going to be OK”.
- Offer unsubstantiated comments about the circumstances or experience of the deceased “ I’m sure he didn’t suffer”.
- Leave someone alone without arranged contacts.