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## LESSON LEARNED

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### Law Enforcement: Death Notification Training for Officers

#### SUMMARY

Law enforcement agencies should have dedicated staff members who are trained and prepared to deliver death notifications. This can help to minimize confusion and trauma suffered by the families of victims and victim survivors.

#### DESCRIPTION

On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech student, Seung Hui Cho, killed 32 students and faculty members, wounded 17 more, and then killed himself in 2 separate incidents on campus. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's emergency plan authorized state law enforcement agencies to conduct interviews and to notify next of kin. Virginia State Police officers, in some instances with local law enforcement officers, personally notified the families of victims at their homes throughout Virginia. State police officers also coordinated with law enforcement officers in other states who then notified families in those jurisdictions. However, law enforcement and University officials were unable to notify all families in this manner.

Local law enforcement agencies lacked staff members who were trained, skilled, and prepared to assist victims' friends and family members upon receipt of death notification. According to the Virginia Tech Review Panel Report, families and victim survivors were treated in a haphazard and inconsistent manner rather than with the appropriate sensitivity. Few were provided with adequate isolation for receiving death notifications. This compounded the pain and trauma of the loss for many families and victim survivors.

The Panel's report observed that victims of crime are best served when they receive immediate support for their needs. Law enforcement and victim services form a strong support system for provision of direct and early support. Death notifications must be delivered with accuracy, sensitivity, and respect for the deceased and their families. Ideally, death notifications should be delivered in private, in person, and in keeping with a specific protocol. The Review Panel Report noted that law enforcement officers should ensure that friends and families are provided private, compassionate notification of the positive identification of the deceased.

Law enforcement agencies should have dedicated staff members who are trained and prepared to deliver death notifications. This can help to minimize confusion and trauma suffered by the families of victims and victim survivors.

#### CITATION

Virginia Tech Review Panel. *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007*. Aug 2007. <https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=26591>

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