Workgroup Notification of an Employee or Family Member Death

Texas A&M University has a strong commitment to students, faculty, and staff, and recognizes that the death of a member of the Aggie family or extended family is filled with feelings of grief and loss. Department heads, managers and supervisors are often responsible for informing the appropriate departments and co-workers of a death but may feel unprepared for this type of response. The guidelines that follow have been developed to assist departmental managers and supervisors in notifying the workgroup or others about the death of an employee or death of an employee’s family member.

Who Should Make the Notification?

- **On-campus death or serious injury:**
  - Before communicating with the workgroup, assure that the family of the deceased or injured has been notified. Although there may be questions following an on-campus death or serious injury, it is critical that no information be delivered prior to notification of family members.
  - In the event of an on-campus death or serious injury the University Police Department will coordinate notification of next of kin or family members. If a student is involved in the incident, Student Affairs Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) will coordinate notification of family members, roommates, etc.
  - Speak with the family soon thereafter to discuss what information they would like disclosed (details regarding the incident, notification about the funeral or memorial service, etc.). Respect the family’s wishes to the best of your ability.
  - Coordinate all media contacts and questions through the Marketing and Communications Department.

- **Off-campus death or serious injury:**
  - Verify that family members have been notified before communicating with the workgroup and others.
  - Notify the workgroup and other organizational business entities, as appropriate.
  - Speak with the family soon thereafter to discuss what information they would like disclosed (details regarding the incident, notification about the funeral or memorial service, etc.). Respect the family’s wishes to the best of your ability.
  - Coordinate all media contacts and questions through the Marketing and Communications Department.

Prior to Notification:

- Decide what you will do if employees need to leave work immediately following the delivery of the news.
- Decide if you would like to make a comment about leave time to attend the funeral and how that will be addressed in Leave Traq.
• Decide if the department will send a condolence letter (see sample below) and inform employees of this.

• Determine whether individual employees may send condolences or specifically indicate what the family has requested in terms of contact and memorials.

• Identify where condolences should be sent or tell the group that you will provide that information as it is available to you.

• Contact the Human Resources Employee Assistance Program (845-3711) if you are concerned about employee reactions. A counselor can address your concerns and, when appropriate, be available on-site to help address employee questions or reactions.

• Access grief and loss materials from the Employee Assistance Program at http://employees.tamu.edu/eap/loss online. You may wish to distribute copies at the meeting(s).

**Best Practices in Notification Procedures:**

• Take a personal approach to the notification by asking the manager or supervisor, who has had a working relationship with the deceased, to be a speaker.

• Utilize a team approach with at least two managers making the notification. This will help reduce the professional and personal pressure that might be felt by the notifiers.

• Prior to notification confirm as many facts of the incident as possible.

• Receive authorization to release factual, confirmed information and clarify specific information that is permissible to release. There may be confidential or investigative information disclosed to you but not to be released to the workgroup.

• Notify face-to-face, particularly within the workgroup. Telephone calls or emails may be permissible with other people or groups who may not have as personal of a relationship with the deceased.

• Keep the group small to enhance communication; a large group may be seen as impersonal.

• Use words such as “died” and “dead” rather than “gone away” or “passed away.”

• Do not downplay a serious injury or give false hope. State the facts as they have been given to you.

**What to Say:**

• Examples of how to start the conversation include:
  
  o “I’m afraid that I have some bad news for you.”
  
  o “I’ve just been informed of news that I need to share with you.”
“I wish I didn’t have to tell you this, I’ve just learned that <employee or dependent name> died.”

- Pause, monitoring reaction of employee(s) and begin to provide facts as you know them.
- If substantial time has passed before the notification was made, explain why.
- If information must be withheld explain why. You may wish to say, “I am unable to share that information due to an on-going investigation,” or, “The family asked that I provide only the information that I have given you.”
- Ask if there are any questions. If you don’t know an answer, it’s okay to say that you don’t have the information.
- Offer the Employee Assistance Program services. A possible statement is, “I know that this loss is upsetting for many employees, I would like to remind you that the Employee Assistance Program is available as a resource if anyone would like to speak to a counselor.”
- Provide grief and loss handouts to employees available from the Employee Assistance Program.
- Allow time for individual questions or individual employee meetings following a group notification. Prior to leaving workgroup notification you may wish to say, “Dealing with the death of a co-worker is an emotional event. I am available to meet privately with anyone who has additional questions or needs to speak with me.”

**Additional Statements:**

- “I wish I didn’t have to tell you this.”
- “I’m sorry this happened.”
- “Grief is something about which we all have reactions and feelings.”
- “It’s common to react with emotion with this kind of news.”
- “I’ll check back with everyone and see how you are doing tomorrow.”
- “This is a difficult time not only for the family of <employee name> but also for all of us who have worked with <employee name>. It’s a very sad time.”

**Avoid These Statements:**

- “Time heals all wounds.” It doesn’t.
- “We must move ahead with our lives.” This statement may seem insensitive.
- “You don’t need to know that information.” A better statement is, “I am unable to answer that question or provide that information because <explain the reason>.”
- “It must have been his/her time.”
• “We have to be strong for <employee name>.”
• “<Employee name> would have wanted us to move ahead and live life.”
• “Someday we’ll understand why this happened.”
• “Let’s focus on our memories and not our loss.” This may seem insensitive; right now focusing on the grief is appropriate.

Sample Condolence Letter for Death of Employee:

Dear <Name>:

I/we were saddened to hear of the death of <employee’s name> and want to express my/our condolences to you and your family. <Insert departmental name> and its staff appreciated the faithful service <employee’s name> contributed.

Because the Department would like to offer support to you and your family during this difficult time, <insert Departmental contact name> has been asked to provide assistance to you in any way possible, including help with University offices associated with such matters as survivor benefits and payroll or pension issues.

Again, please accept my/our sincerest sympathy. Please let me/us know if I/we can help you in any way.

Sincerely,

<Department Head or other Employee Names>

Sample Condolence Letter for Death of a Family Member:

Dear <Employee Name>:

I/we were saddened to hear of the death of <insert family member’s name>. I/we know that this is a difficult time for you and your family. Words are inadequate at a time like this; however, please know that you and your family are in our thoughts.

On behalf of all personnel of <insert departmental name>, I/we extend our deepest sympathy. Please let me/us know if I/we can help you in any way.

Sincerely,

<Department Head or other Employee Names>

For assistance, contact the Employee Assistance Program (979) 845-3711 or visit http://employees.tamu.edu/eap/loss online.