

Families of the Fallen

4251 Wilfred Avenue SW • Grandville, Michigan 49418 • Tel. 661-472-1991
www.familiesofthefallen.net

Support Protocol

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Dear Firefighter Family,

Welcome to *Families of the Fallen*. The potential and hope of this protocol is anchored on the stalwart nature of your profession. It is set against the backdrop comprised of the families who personify the unparalleled alliance of the fire department community, and has been wrought under tragic circumstances which are familiar to your occupation. The guidelines within these pages will assist you as you navigate through the fragile and sometimes tenuous situations you will encounter as you determine to uphold the families of your fallen comrades. You will need to brave this challenge like you do your job; like my husband did. With industrious perseverance, steadfast resolve, patience, kindness, and self-sacrifice. I know you will; you are firefighters.

With Gratitude,

Susan VandePol
Widow of Fallen Firefighter Robert M. Ortega
Los Angeles City Fire Department

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Introduction

Because of the unique position in which widows are immersed, and because the overwhelming majority of fatalities from a line-of-duty death are male, leaving a female spouse/partner behind, this protocol is primarily addressed to their situations and needs. However, much of what is contained herein can be easily adapted to aid and support a spouse/partner of the opposite gender. That being said, the emphasis throughout this protocol is to alleviate the often undefined awkward and vulnerable position in which a widow finds herself. She is uncertain of who to ask for help, and though it is not often spoken about, there are certain societal and cultural boundaries that make it difficult for a widow to ask a man for help regardless of whether he is single or married. She wants to receive aid from within the fire department family because she knows that she can trust them. This issue of trust is often overlooked, but for a widow, is paramount. Congruently, firefighters want to support them, but are unsure of what type of help should be offered, and how frequent the contact should be between the family and the department or local. The firefighters are often grieving themselves and are in need of a way to express that grief in a manner that they know will help the family of the fallen firefighter without making the now single spouse/partner, or the firefighter's own family feel uncomfortable. In addition, and as is often the case within the fire department community, a grieving family may live far outside the jurisdiction in which their loved one worked. This can magnify her dilemma of who to ask for help, and of who she can trust.

The suggested protocol included in the following, addresses these issues and gives the guidelines needed to help alleviate the aforementioned difficulties. It is encouraged that each department adopt these guidelines as an official part of their post-LODD protocol because when it is offered under the auspices and within the parameters of a sanctioned and existing code of conduct, much of the awkwardness and fear of being single, from both the widow's and the firefighter's perspective is removed. She, the firefighter, and both families will feel safe; imperative. Any potential regret that the fire department personnel may have as a result of not helping or, helping too much because of the uncertainties already mentioned is largely eliminated. This protocol includes suggestions on how and when to initiate contact, time parameters within which to offer assistance, liaison definitions and descriptions, communication logs to aid liaisons in keeping track of the family's needs, plus a few other reference logs that will be helpful. Having the liaisons designated and the resources gathered prior to a fatality is strongly suggested and will be advantageous in the effort to minimize the turmoil of trying to find them during an extremely overwhelming and already chaotic time for the grieving family as well as the fallen firefighter's own department and local.

The *Families of the Fallen* support protocol will enable the fire department community to give assistance to the surviving families of fallen firefighters by assessing and meeting the particular needs of those families. With this approach the needs will be defined, then networked out by a Liaison in the effort to aid each family as the transition through the grieving process takes place. Each department/local is strongly encouraged to acquire names of volunteers from within their department/local, and trusted family or community members, including contact information and area of expertise and/or ability within which they are willing to give aid. Ideally, if every fire department/local throughout the U.S. and Canada were to adopt this protocol, no matter how far outside the home department's jurisdiction the grieving family lives, or where they may move to, a Liaison will be there to contact them and continue to come alongside them when they have need.

Procedures For Liaisons

Department Liaison

- I. It is suggested that this Liaison be identified before a death occurs, thereby helping to alleviate the undue stress of searching for one during an already chaotic time. A Chaplain or other member from within the department may be used. He/she would be the primary contact for the program, and oversee :
 - A. It's operation
 - B. The gathering and maintenance of resources
 - C. Each department member's contact information

- II. This Liaison would also initiate contact with the Family Liaison immediately, and maintain contact with them for the suggested duration of two years. If a Family Liaison has not been previously chosen, the Department Liaison would make or oversee the appointment of one, or initially serve in that position until someone has been selected.

- III. The Department Liaison would be the first department contact connected with this protocol after a fatality, and would begin the process of initiating the protocol. This contact should be made within 72 to 96 hours after the death of the firefighter, and be via a phone call. The reason the initial contact is made by the Department Liaison and not the Family Liaison is because of the probability that he/she will not have been as close emotionally to the fallen firefighter as the Family Liaison would most likely be. The Department Liaison should :
 - A. Introduce himself/herself, as well as:
 1. The protocol
 2. How it works
 3. Assure it's confidentiality
 4. Leave his/her phone number and name as well as name and phone number of the Family Liaison if known at the time.
 5. Ask if there are any immediate needs or questions and inform the Family Liaison
 6. If the family lives or moves outside the jurisdiction of the fallen firefighter's department, find out if there is a Department Liaison within the department closest to the family and make contact with them apprising them of the fatality and all pertinent information.
 - a. This local department may be used in case of an emergency or any way deemed necessary, such as a work party.
 7. Follow up with the Family Liaison to make sure that whatever needs have been expressed are met as soon as possible, and when promised.
 - a. It is extremely important that all communication be consistent and that any assistance promised is supplied.
 8. If needed, evaluate the cost and method of payment for aid given.
 - a. If applicable, each department should predetermine the origin of any financial aid and method of payment for any services rendered.

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9. It may be helpful for the Department Liaison to make contact with an outside family member, friend, school, or religious affiliate if deemed necessary and if approved of by the family. It is possible that these “outside” resources may sometimes provide insight into the grieving family’s needs that otherwise may go unnoticed or unmentioned.
 - a. Refer to “Emergency Contact” information page.
 - b. Inform these contacts about the protocol and leave Liaison phone numbers.

Family Liaison

- I. The Family Liaison is the second contact in connection with this protocol, and is the primary channel of aid and communication between the family and department aid.
 - A. Because of the fact that there are sometimes multiple fatalities from within one station house, it may be wise for a member to consider choosing a Family Liaison from a station other than his own.
- II. The Family Liaison should be responsible for sending flowers to the funeral, and on the first and second anniversary of the fallen firefighter’s death.
- III. They will work with the Department Liaison in the implementation of the protocol, and give updates to him/her regularly.
 - A. A Communication Log has been provided which should be used to help the Liaison keep track of the family’s needs, aid given, and follow-up.
- IV. This contact, originating with the Family Liaison to the surviving family should continue for two years, tapering off at the following intervals :
 - A. The first four months: bi-weekly
 - B. Remainder of the first year: monthly
 - C. Year two: bi-monthly

Resources

Resource information can be acquired in any way that each individual department may deem appropriate. A suggestion may be to include a questionnaire in the paperwork used during annual physicals, or a simple questionnaire to each station inquiring as to within what area each firefighter, family member, or trusted community contact may want to offer his/her expertise or aid. Acquiring this information prior to a fatality is suggested and encouraged, as it will be instrumental in the success of this protocol.

There should be no expectation that any assistance will be provided without charge unless confirmed with the person giving the aid or if the fire department/local involved has said that they will pay for the assistance. The emphasis here is to assure the family that they are paying a fair price for a quality service from a source they can trust.

- I. Emotional, spiritual, psychological, life coaching, grief coaching, or bereavement and counseling services.
 - A. These referrals, in particular, should be discussed with department leadership or other firefighters or department personnel, and verified as legitimate and of the highest integrity.
- II. Financial
 - A. The Department Liaison should be aware that there may be financial issues to be dealt with, including educational benefits, reimbursements, workers' compensation, PSOB etc., that may be available to the family or that the family may need clarification on. If the Department Liaison is not well versed in these areas, someone from within the department or local should be identified prior to a fatality and added to the Resource Log.
 - B. Sometimes all that will be needed by the widow/partner is someone to teach her how to balance a checkbook or use an ATM. In any case, the Liaison should not give financial advice or become involved in the family's personal finances, but can use the Resource Log to refer them to an expert.
- III. Legal
 - A. Again, the Liaisons should refrain from giving any legal advice, and refer the family to the Department lawyer if applicable, or acquire a trusted name from the Resource Log.
- IV. Practical Assistance
 - A. This includes but is not limited to : property maintenance, home or auto repair, and guidance in any or all of these areas. Liaisons should refer to their existing Department and Community Resource Logs that coincide with this protocol.

Boundaries and Decorum

A few words need to be said about boundaries and decorum within the parameters of this protocol. How adamantly these suggestions are adhered to will be the job of each individual department to oversee. Ideally, this should all go without saying. Realistically, it must go on record as being said along with the reminder that it is not a Liaison's job to replace the deceased firefighter.

When a Liaison, another department, local, community member, or anyone in conjunction with this protocol goes to the home of a fallen firefighter, they should report to the Department Liaison first, and make sure that the visit is logged. This will not only help insure that the aid needed was given, but also serve as a reference for each department as they review and evaluate this protocol.

When contact with the family is made, the purpose for any visit should be confirmed, including the day and time of arrival, and that it is under the auspices of the *Families of the Fallen* from within that department. It is important that there is another adult present either with the widow at the house, or with the person making the visit. If "personal involvement" becomes an issue, the firefighter's or community member's involvement in the protocol may need to be re-evaluated, and that member should remove himself from the program as it pertains to that particular relationship.

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Family Information

Family Name: _____

Widow/Widower: _____

Children/Ages:

Home address:

Mailing address (if applicable):

Home phone: _____

Work phone: _____

Cell phone: _____

Name of deceased: _____

Date of passing: _____

Cause of death: _____

Years on department: _____

Last house: _____

Emergency Contact Information

Name of nearest relative: _____

Home address:

Mailing address (if applicable):

Home phone: _____

Cell phone: _____

Name of friend: _____

Home address:

Mailing address (if applicable):

Home phone: _____

Cell phone: _____

Emergency Contact Information (continued)

School Information

1. Name of child: _____
Name of school: _____
Name of school contact: _____
Phone: _____

2. Name of child: _____
Name of school: _____
Name of school contact: _____
Phone: _____

3. Name of child: _____
Name of school: _____
Name of school contact: _____
Phone: _____

4. Name of child: _____
Name of school: _____
Name of school contact: _____
Phone: _____

Religious Information

Place of worship: _____
Name of contact: _____
Phone: _____

Department Contact Information

Department liaison: _____

Home address:

Mailing address (if applicable):

Home phone: _____

Cell phone: _____

Station #: _____

Shift: _____

Station phone numbers:

Station Contact Information

Station liaison: _____

Home address:

Mailing address (if applicable):

Home phone: _____

Cell phone: _____

Station #: _____

Shift: _____

Station phone numbers: _____

Communication Log

Date of contact: _____

Needs expressed:

Action taken:

Follow-up:

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Department Resources

Name: _____
Station #: _____
Station phone numbers: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Station #: _____
Station phone numbers: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Station #: _____
Station phone numbers: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Station #: _____
Station phone numbers: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Station #: _____
Station phone numbers: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

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Community Resources

Name: _____
Affiliation: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Work phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Affiliation: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Work phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Affiliation: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Work phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Affiliation: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Work phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____

Name: _____
Affiliation: _____
Home phone: _____
Cell phone: _____
Work phone: _____
Area of expertise: _____