



The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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Bereaved Through Crime

Supporting Families Bereaved Through Crime - Brochure for First Responders

Introduction:

Bereaved through crime is defined as: "A death as a result of an incident where another person is believed to be criminally liable." This brochure contains information designed to assist first responders, health care professionals and support workers by providing suggestions for working effectively with families bereaved through crime.

The brochure addresses issues which arise soon after a death, and includes suggestions about how to assist people to cope with the court process. The nature of the family's sudden tragic loss requires skilled and sensitive support to address their specific needs and to provide access to necessary resources. The most effective strategy when assisting a family bereaved through crime is to facilitate a support network with a range of options. The information contained in this brochure was collected during focus group meetings convened for this purpose by The Compassionate Friends and included parents and siblings bereaved through crime. Members of focus groups were recruited through various support agencies.

Support issues raised by members of the focus groups:

Always refer to their family member by name

Be honest, do not try to protect families from the truth ? their imaginings are often worse than the reality.

Allow sufficient time for any consultation. Make a double appointment if necessary

Offer the family a secure, safe environment in which to share their feelings openly or sit in silence if needed.

Outpourings of emotion are normal, this is healthy.

Ensure that the family are travelling to any consultation safely (eg. avoid driving long distances alone) by assisting them to make appropriate arrangements.

Give consideration to a home visit.

When seeing an individual inquire about their family and if need be invite other family members to use your service.

Provide the family with details of other relevant services (see 'other resources') including after hours access. Your knowledge of community support services will enhance the development of an effective support network for each family.

Be prepared to comfort your clients if appropriate. Human contact is our most basic form of comfort and communication.

Expect the family to be angry and vengeful this is a normal reaction.

Encourage them to examine their feelings in a secure and safe environment.

Families will often appreciate 'follow up' calls. These will provide you with the opportunity to check on their well being.

Continually assess the bereaved family's Physiological needs.

Ensure that they are eating, exercising and resting adequately.

Be prepared to use creative methods to support families bereaved through crime.

Compassionate Friends has valuable resources to assist you.

Grieving is a continuing process and the need for support will be ongoing. The supportive relationship should continue for as long as the family needs.

Part 1 - Notification

Being told that a family member has died violently is deeply traumatic. Those responsible for the death notification must ensure the family are adequately informed about the circumstances of the death. The following information should be seen as the minimum to be conveyed to the family and is best delivered in a sensitive and caring manner. It should be delivered with complete honesty. Without a full explanation people tend to imagine the worst.

After giving the following information verbally it should be handed to the family in written form

When and where the family member died

Who was with them

Investigating officer's name/number/station/phone number/availability

The current location of their family member's body.

Who the family should contact to see their body

Details of the offender if known

Arrangement of further assistance for family i.e. grief counselling/support

Description of the process from this point

Note: Those responsible for delivering the death notification should seek appropriate debriefing.

Part 2 - Identification

The family should have access to all available information prior to the identification procedure. Family members need to be given the opportunity to take part. Where the immediate family decides not to be personally involved they should always be notified about when and where the identification process is to occur. Ideally the family should then be offered the opportunity to choose a willing member of their family/friends.

At the time, or prior to the identification, this information should be given to the family and/or their representative:

Inform the family of their rights

Details of where the identification will occur including a description of the physical environment.

Invite the family to take a lock of hair or photographs if they wish

Ensure that the body is only labelled by any known name e.g. not with an X

Explain all of the injuries

Describe the likely cause of death

Describe any medical instruments/apparatus that may still be attached to their family member and explain why.

Ask the family if they require privacy during the formal process or would they prefer you to remain with them for support.

Allow them to remain with their family member for as long as is feasible

Try to offer them the opportunity to touch and talk to their family member if possible

Arrange debriefing for the person performing the identification

Part 3 – Funerals

Funerals are a vital part of grieving. The funeral represents the final act of loving care for their family member. Sudden untimely death leaves people in shock and unable to make considered decisions - they should not be rushed to complete funeral arrangements. Your role in facilitating contact with services involved, providing information about available options and making the time and space for reflection can be of immeasurable assistance.

Funeral issues identified by the focus groups are:

Bereaved families are not required to pay for reasonable funeral costs if it is known or suspected that their family member has died as a result of a crime. The Victorian Police Victim Advisory Unit may be able to assist with the paperwork associated with claiming the funeral costs. It may also be necessary for the family to contact a solicitor. The family needs to be aware that Coronial investigations influence when a family member's body is released into their care. It is not a legal requirement that the family organize the funeral quickly. Friends and professionals can offer to assist the family to make the funeral and other practical arrangements. The family needs to be given the opportunity to explore all of the creative options available to them. You can assist them in this process

More detailed information regarding funerals is available from funeral directors and The Compassionate Friends.

Part 4 - The Court Process

When assisting a family bereaved through crime you need to have regard for the legal process in which they are involved. Families will often ask about the court process and possible outcomes. Providing this information can help develop realistic expectations. You can consider attending court to offer further support. Information about the court process and possible outcomes is available from the Witness Assistance Service attached to the Office of Public Prosecutions.

This section includes information which families may find helpful prior to attending court:

If it is practical the family can choose to visit the court in an attempt to understand the process before the trial (contact Court Network)

The court will be conducted in a dispassionate manner and the outcome can never be predicted.

Their family member who died may be referred to as the 'deceased' for the duration of the proceedings

Those representing the accused will use any means to assist their client. This may include attempting to denigrate the character of the person who has died.

The prosecuting barrister represents the State, not the family of the person who has died.

The legal process may continue for an extended period due to appeals by the defence and/or prosecution

Families will not necessarily be personally notified about court dates

If the accused is found guilty the family has the right to present Victim Impact Statements to the court (verbal or written)

Sentencing is the attempt to assign a legal punishment according to multiple, complex factors.

Expect the family to experience a severe emotional "let down" following the conclusion of the legal process.

Other Resources

Details of current phone numbers for these services are available from The Compassionate Friends, or your current telephone directory.

- Coronial Services Centre Grief Counselling
- Court Network
- Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade
- Director of Public Prosecutions
- Homicide Victims Support Group (Aust.) Inc. (N.S.W. Only)
- Road Trauma Support Team
- Transport Accident Commission
- Victims Referral & Assistance Service
- Victoria Police Accident Investigation Squad
- Victoria Police Homicide Squad
- Victoria Police Missing Persons Unit
- Victoria Police Victim Advisory Unit
- VOCAL Inc. Victim Support Services
- Witness Assistance Service