



International Association of Fire Fighters Fallen Fire Fighter Family Support after Line-of-Duty Deaths

The IAFF embraces the families of our fallen because we recognize the need for those families to have a support program available after a line-of-duty death. We also believe that because our members know their union will be there to assist their families, they can do their job with a relative peace of mind, even as they face the inherent dangers of their job each day.

The following information is provided to address family support issues for IAFF affiliates in the event of the line-of-duty death of a member. It is solely provided for assistance purposes; each individual affiliate should evaluate its local conditions and use, amend or change these recommendations accordingly.

Family Support and Assistance Process

Spouses, partners, children and family members who experience significant loss are seriously affected in several areas of their life. But it is also during this time of emotional stress that family members will likely be overwhelmed with all kinds of information and decisions that require immediate resolution. Information processing and decision-making can also be affected by the emotional needs and condition of the family members.

Fire departments and IAFF affiliates can and should provide families structured support after a line-of-duty death. This assistance can help families make critical decisions during a period of high emotional distress.

The family support process involves a core group of support personnel, typically called family liaisons. Such family liaisons must have strong interpersonal skills, the ability to gain the support of family members and skills in managing and coordinating service delivery systems. The family liaison can serve as the:

- Information gatherer for the family;
- Emotional support provider for family members;
- Organizer and coordinator of support systems as needed by family; and
- Arbitrator between family and other systems of support and service delivery.

Department Liaison

The fire department and the IAFF affiliate may consider jointly appointing a department liaison to serve as an overall point of contact and to assist with fire department activities after a fire fighter line-of-duty death. This individual can assist with the maintenance and update of all members' emergency contact information and initially assist with liaison duties until the family liaison is selected and approved. Once a family liaison is selected, the department liaison would have no interactive role with the family; rather, the department liaison would work with the family through the family liaison. The department liaison can maintain resources, protocols and policies related to or for assistance with line-of-duty deaths and provide such resources to the family liaison. These include, but are not limited to:

- Contact information for fire department and union leadership, including their roles and responsibilities with line-of-duty death activities.
- Contact information for department, local, state/provincial or federal offices involved in personnel, pensions, civil service, death benefits, funeral reimbursement, educational benefits, workers'

- compensation, public/private insurance benefits and official documents (birth, marriage, divorce, death) retrieval, Descriptions of such benefits should be maintained and kept up-to-date.
- Procedures, guidelines and policies for line-of-duty death notification, assistance, and investigation.
 - Contact information for counseling and bereavement services available to the fire department and IAFF affiliate and descriptions of such services. Line-of-duty funeral protocols for fire department funeral or memorial services.
 - Funeral arrangements, burial options and contact information for local funeral homes and cemeteries, as well as cremation and alternative burial options. Contact and process information should also be maintained on tissue and organ donations.

Role of a Family Liaison

The role of the family liaison is a traditional duty within the fire service. Historically, members have served informally as liaisons between the family and the fire department following a line-of-duty death. The roles and responsibilities of the family liaison can become wide and ranging because the liaison will be tasked with providing short- and long-term family support services to a family of a fallen member.

The family liaison is a representative of the IAFF affiliate and the fire department that interacts with the spouse or partner and family of the lost member to assist in their short-term and long-term recovery.

Often after a line-of-duty death, the family is emotionally overwhelmed, and has no or little knowledge of the resources, assistance and support that are available. The family liaison acts to bridge resource and support coordination from the fire department and the IAFF affiliate to the grieving family.

The family liaison has a dual responsibility of supporting the family and providing assurance to the fire department and local IAFF affiliate that the needs of the family are being met.

The fire department and IAFF affiliate need to select a member(s) as the family liaison. This process must include discussion and approval from the family.

Family liaisons must understand and adapt to the role change from providing immediate guidance after the death and during the funeral process to long-term family support. Their core responsibilities include:

- Empowering the family to become decision-makers involving significant issues;
- Protecting the family from disruptive and intrusive events;
- Providing emotional and logistical support; and
- Gathering information so the family can make informed decisions.

The fire department and IAFF affiliate must ensure that the family liaison be informed of the responsibilities of the family liaison and the time commitment necessary for such short-term and possibly long-term family assistance.

Functions of a Family Liaison

Family liaisons assess the needs of a family after a line-of-duty death and coordinate and facilitate the short- and long-term support. They serve as the primary contact with the family to ensure that family needs are met. Family liaisons will discuss the process with the family, arrange schedules and contact times, and describe what services and assistance are available.

Family liaisons can assist a family with concrete details regarding a member's death. They can represent the family's needs and desires during the planning of the member's wake, funeral and memorial service.

Within the initial hours after the line-of-duty death, the appointed family liaison must make an initial assessment of the family's support needs. Decisions will be necessary on family access and appropriate notification of family and friends.

The family liaison will need to be prepared to immediately assist the family with numerous issues, including the following:

- Providing the family with information regarding death and bereavement.
- Presenting information regarding formal identification of and disposition of body.
- Providing information about the member's preference regarding organ/tissue donation.
- Working with the family to make decisions regarding:
 - Type of burial/cremation
 - Funeral homes
 - Cemetery
 - Choice of church/clergy
 - Visitation or wake
 - Selection of funeral/memorial services
 - Times of visitation/service
 - Service participants, dignitaries, readings, music and eulogies
 - Reception following burial
 - Announcements for service
- Screening outside contact with family, including news media.
- Choosing photographs and other memorial items for display.
- Continuing with assessment of family support needs.
- Mobilizing the initial request of support services.

During the visitation or wake and during the funeral or memorial service the family liaison is responsible and has the primary concern of assisting the family, including transportation, escort and seating. The family liaison remains with family during these services.

Family liaisons also assess the ongoing and long-term needs of a family and provide them with information, including resources available from within the fire station, the fire department, the IAFF affiliate and the community. The family liaison should obtain or be provided with a list of services and contacts from trusted resources within the department or community from the department liaison, if one has been previously appointed, or from the fire department or IAFF affiliate. Such resources can include:

- Bereavement and counseling services. Such referrals must be discussed with fire department or IAFF affiliate Employee Assistance Program advisors or fire department counselors. Verification of the quality of any referral must be assured. Such verification can be ascertained by consulting with other fire department members, their families or service providers that have significant work experience with emergency responders.
- Financial. The family liaison should be familiar with the financial benefits available to the family and how to apply for such funds. These include pension, state (worker compensation) and federal death benefits (PSOB), funeral reimbursement, educational benefits (state and federal), insurance, veteran's benefits, etc. The family may have to rely on an IAFF affiliate leader or the jurisdiction's personnel department for detailed assistance on these issues. The family liaison should not be personally involved in advising the family or handling any family financial resources. Financial advice must be left with the family and financial planning experts.
- Legal. The family liaison should keep the family apprised of any investigations or criminal proceedings involved in the line-of-duty death. Specific legal advice is to be provided by legal experts, not the family liaison.
- Property Maintenance/Repair Assistance or Guidance. The family liaison can assist with locating appropriate resources for home or property repair and maintenance. There is no expectation that such assistance is provided without charge, but the family liaison can attempt to ensure that the family is getting a fair price for quality services. The family liaison can assist in informing the

family of the day-to-day operations of the family's home (for example utilities, heating/air conditioning, scheduled maintenance, yard care, etc.). However, the goal of the family support service is to empower the family through their transition. Therefore, the family liaison role is to assist or inform and not to necessarily perform every task.

Family Liaison Boundaries

Family Liaisons are responsible for setting boundaries when interacting with the family of the deceased. It is important for all family liaisons to know that it is not their role to replace the deceased member.

The family liaison is to understand that there needs to be a balance between providing family support during a difficult time and the needs of their own personal, family and professional responsibilities.

Family liaisons must have the ability to say "No, I can't do this." No family liaison is on duty 24/7.

In order to prevent burnout and to maintain appropriate boundaries, family liaisons cannot make themselves available at all times. Family liaison work is an ongoing and transitional process; therefore, it is important that family liaisons conduct these activities in moderation.

Family liaisons must become familiar with their personal limits and will have to judge for themselves when to take a break. At a certain point, it may be time to stop being a family liaison or time to ask for help or a replacement. Family liaisons can seek support from their family and other fire department members, or seek professional help.

Emergency responders spend their career helping others, traditionally working as a team. This effort is not any different. While serving as the family liaison, peer support must be requested from other members to ensure a successful family support program. The most effective family liaisons are those who work together with their peers to assist families in need.

Family Liaison Logistics

Some members may have selected their primary and alternate choice of a family liaison in event of their death or serious injury. It is encouraged that the fire department and the IAFF affiliate establish an emergency contact procedure and policy that encourages the establishment and annual review of each member's emergency contacts, including selection of a family liaison. When family liaisons are not pre-selected, conducting a fire station meeting is an effective way to recruit members for this role.

Ensure that a fire officer is available to assist and support the family liaisons. Any family support problem should be discussed with this fire officer.

Long-term support, logistics and distance may require the assignment of additional family liaisons. Several members can also serve as family liaisons for each family at the same time. They are encouraged to meet together with the family and should communicate and coordinate items to prevent duplication of services. Family liaisons should be rotated during a long-term family assistance process.

Before a family liaison is assigned, ensure that the family is prepared ahead of time and is educated about the role of the family liaison.

A long-term family liaison rotation schedule should be developed and implemented. Experience has shown that undue stress is placed on the family and the family liaison, as well as the fire department and the IAFF affiliate, when schedules and rotations are not established and followed.

Family liaison services must be consistent. Family liaisons must not make any promises that cannot be delivered and must ensure that any resources that are offered are delivered as and when promised.

In cases where the family lives outside the jurisdiction where the member worked, the family liaison should consult with the local fire department and IAFF affiliate to establish available contacts in the event of a family support emergency. These contacts may be provided to the family for use when the family liaison cannot be reached for immediate support.

Emergency Contact and Beneficiary Forms

All IAFF affiliates should ensure that their members have completed a list of emergency contacts that can be used in time of emergency. If the IAFF affiliate does not have such a form, please review the generic form found on the IAFF website. Please ensure that your local develops a process for collecting and maintaining emergency contact information for all members. These documents should be reviewed and updated annually. Additionally, it is the policy of the IAFF that each IAFF affiliate institutes a program requiring an annual review of beneficiaries that, at a minimum, requires the member to either change beneficiaries or sign a statement verifying that the beneficiaries are correct. Accordingly, please ensure all member beneficiaries are kept up-to-date.

Conclusion

The IAFF provides this information to assist affiliates in ensuring that we are always there for the families of our fallen. Every fire department and IAFF affiliate is different and the information should be adjusted accordingly, however, the IAFF asks each affiliate to be sure to implement a family support program using these guidelines to be prepared when a member is lost in the line of duty.

¹ For additional information on procedures for notifying, assisting and investigating after a line-of-duty death, see the *IAFF Line-of-Duty Death Notification, Assistance, and Investigation Policy*.

² For additional information on procedures and protocol after a line-of-duty death, see the *IAFF Funeral Protocol for Line-of-Duty Deaths*.

³ For additional information on procedures on US federal benefits, see the *IAFF Summary of the Federal (US) Benefits for Public Safety Officers, PSOB AND PSOEA Programs*

The Fallen Fire Fighter Family Support After Line-Of-Duty Deaths Guidelines were adopted by the IAFF Executive Board in June 2008 and updated in September 2009. They were developed by the IAFF in compliance with Emergency Resolution 47 submitted by IAFF Local 112, Los Angeles City and approved by the delegates assembled in Toronto, Ontario in August 2006. The guidelines were developed by IAFF members involved in family support and counseling; with input from spouses of our fallen members, especially the widow of Local 112 member Robert M. Ortega. The family support documents were further reviewed and revised by the IAFF Executive Board Occupational Safety and Health Committee and IAFF Executive Board Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial Committee prior to adoption by the IAFF Executive Board. Further assistance is available to IAFF affiliates on these guidelines as well as all other issues and programs pertaining to the death of an IAFF member through the IAFF Division of Occupational Health, Safety and Medicine.