Compassionate Guide

For the families left behind after a highway death in South Carolina

Families of Highway Fatalities

A road to hope.

Provided by: SC Department of Public Safety, Families of Highway Fatalities
To contact the Families of Highway Fatalities Coordinator, please call 803-896-8171.
www.scdps.gov/fhf

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The Knock at the Door

This booklet has been provided to your family because you have recently suffered the devastating loss of a precious and beloved family member in a traffic collision. Please accept our most sincere sympathies and condolences. **You are not alone.** Tragically, about 800 people die each year on South Carolina highways.

Right now, you may be facing overwhelming emotions, which can cloud your decision-making process. This booklet contains advice and guidance based on personal experiences of other surviving families that may help you navigate some of the issues you will face in the days ahead. **You or a family member may wish to pass along this guide to a trusted "family representative" to assist with immediate plans.**

We are here to provide support in the days, weeks, months and years following these tragic losses. We sincerely hope this information will lessen some of the stress you face right now, and provide you with some level of comfort. Please remember, we are here if you need us.

- Families of Highway Fatalities

The Victims Creed

Just as your lost loved one is a victim of tragedy, so too are you and your family members. That is why it is important that you and your family are treated with respect and dignity by law enforcement, coroners, the funeral home, family and friends. Likewise, it is important that you — in the midst of your grief — find the internal resources to navigate the challenges, paperwork, processes and difficult decisions ahead of you. We hope you will not be intimidated by officials or afraid to ask for something that is important to you. If there are legal or other issues that might prohibit your request, you will be informed.

We believe it is important for you to recognize that certain options or rights are — and should be — available to you. Some of these options/rights include:

- the option to delay or defer certain decisions;
- the option to honor your loved one during the funeral or memorial service in the way that seems most fitting to you;
- the option to request a lock of hair, handprints, clothing, etc., or to make other personal requests;
- the right to make the very personal decision, with advice from funeral home professionals, regarding the viewing/touching of your loved one;
- the right to legally coordinate, according to your timetable, giving away any of your loved one's possessions;
- the option to delegate tasks and ask for help;
- the option to display photos/videos of your loved one at the time of viewing;
- the right not to speak with the news media.

I Don't Know What to Do Now ...

It is natural to feel helpless and hopeless at this tragic time. However, there are some immediate issues or areas of concern you must face during the trying days and months ahead.

Notify next of kin once you receive the news:

Ensure the closest next of kin is notified first, especially if it is possible that they may hear of the tragedy from another source, such as television, radio news or social media networks. Notify most immediate family members first (i.e., spouse or parents). Notification of immediate family members is better in person rather than by phone. Avoid driving yourself if at all possible during this time. Secure the assistance of friends or other family members should you have to travel to share the news.

Make sure young children are receiving proper care:

Do not forget about young children who may need to be picked up from day care, school, extracurricular or church activities. Ensure there is someone to handle this and that they are prepared to answer questions at your discretion.

Immediately appoint a family member or friend to serve as the "family representative":

An important first step may be to appoint a trusted family member or friend to serve as your "family representative." There will be visitors, phone calls, funeral arrangements and a multitude of decisions to make. Someone more distant from the loss that can help manage some of these issues could prove very valuable to your family.

Suggested "To-Do List" for the Family Representative

Your most important job right now as the appointed "family representative" is to see that your friend or family member is cared for in a compassionate, respectful and loving manner. Try to insulate them from added stressors. There is great comfort for them in knowing someone else is helping them take charge during their time of grief.

Care of the "surviving" family:

- ❑ See to the family's immediate needs.
- ❑ Ensure that young children are notified in an age-appropriate way and are cared for at all times.
- ❑ Ensure that food is available and that the family is eating, drinking and resting.
- ❑ Provide a safe haven with fresh air, space and privacy for the family to openly express sorrow.
- ❑ Notify family church and/or pastor to provide support and comfort to the family.
- ❑ With the family's permission, consider calling primary care physician for special needs or concerns.
- ❑ Obtain phone numbers of people to be contacted. Find out who the family wishes to contact personally and who may be contacted by you.
- ❑ Manage/screen phone calls and visitors and keep a list.
- ❑ Insulate the family from potentially hurtful people or comments.

Household management/maintenance:

- ❑ Prepare for food, clean out the refrigerator, make counter space.
- ❑ Take out garbage.
- ❑ Tidy the house. Sweep or vacuum. Do a quick clean of bathrooms in anticipation of visitors.
- ❑ Keep at least one phone line (such as a cell phone) open for important calls.
- ❑ Keep a list of flower and food deliveries, and keep track of cards and gifts.
- ❑ Care for pets.
- ❑ If the deceased was living in a separate residence, make sure the

residence is secured. If no other individual currently lives there, be sure to care for any animals, take out garbage and securely lock the premises.

- ❑ If the deceased leased the premises, notify the landlord.
- ❑ Notify post office about mail delivery.

Funeral Arrangements:

- ❑ Provide choices and assist the family with funeral home selection.
- ❑ Assist the family in deciding the form of interment and type of funeral ceremony, public or private.
- ❑ Contact the funeral home and begin to make arrangements, including funeral site.
- ❑ Select clergy to officiate.
- ❑ Contact newspaper to place announcement/obituary. The funeral director may assist with this. There are usually deadlines and a fee if the obituary exceeds a certain length.

Immediate legal issues/paperwork:

- ❑ Notify all insurance companies: life insurance, auto insurance, social security, unions, military, credit cards, employment etc.
- ❑ Check for income from any of these sources as well. Consider veteran's benefits, retirement funds, etc. Be prepared for delays.
- ❑ Notify attorney, accountant, executor of estate and locate will - as applicable.
- ❑ Notify employers/schools of loved one and of immediate family members.
- ❑ Notify bank and/or creditors.

Legal documents that you may need include the following:

- ❑ will
- ❑ birth certificate
- ❑ social security card
- ❑ marriage license
- ❑ citizenship papers
- ❑ insurance papers
- ❑ automobile titles
- ❑ deeds to property
- ❑ income tax returns
- ❑ veteran's discharge papers
- ❑ disability claims
- ❑ cemetery deed

What to Expect from Officials

South Carolina state law requires the Coroner to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner and cause of all unexpected, violent, or unusual deaths. Certain natural deaths must be investigated as well.

Coroner's Office:

- The Coroner or a Deputy Coroner will notify you of the death. He/she may or may not be accompanied by a law enforcement officer.
- If an individual dies at the scene and is an organ donor, the Coroner contacts the South Carolina Organ Procurement Agency, Inc. (SCOPA), then contacts the family to discuss organ and tissue donations. If an individual who is an organ donor dies in a hospital, the respective hospital contacts SCOPA. Timing is critical.
- Personal effects of your loved one will be released to the family.
- Your loved one will be held only as long as necessary.
- Explanations of the process of release and things that may delay release i.e. autopsy, toxicology, examination, etc.
- The family must select the funeral home of your choice. The selected funeral home contacts the Coroner's Office to facilitate transfer of the body.
- Certification of the death certificate, which is prepared by the funeral home.
- Some counties may provide compassionate volunteer services through the local Coroner's Office to offer comfort and practical assistance to the family.

Law Enforcement:

In the majority of fatal crashes, the SC Highway Patrol (SCHP) will be the investigating entity. However, whether the investigating law enforcement agency is state or local, the agency will likely

need the following from you:

- your information as the "next of kin," such as name, address, phone number, e-mail address and relationship to the deceased.
- you will be provided with a Financial Responsibility Form (insurance form for the vehicle involved in the collision), which will need to be completed by the insurance agent or company that insures the vehicle.

You may:

- Request the lead investigating officer's/trooper's contact information.
- If the case is a criminal or ongoing one, you may contact the investigating trooper with questions regarding your case.
- Request the assistance of a Victim's Advocate within the SCHP.
- Receive emotional support or crisis/grief counseling.
- Request information regarding application for the Victims' Compensation Fund.
- Receive criminal justice system and other relevant case information.
- Receive referrals to agencies for counseling and other services;
- Request court escorts.
- Request a copy of the collision report.
- Contact the Families of Highway Fatalities coordinator if you need peer counseling or emotional support at 803-896-8171, **or www.scdps.gov**.

Should you have trouble reaching your local Highway Patrol Troop, please refer to **www.scdps.gov/schp**, which has contact information for each of the Highway Patrol's seven geographic Troops (or call the office at 803-896-7920).

Making Funeral Arrangements

It is very important that immediate family members be involved in funeral and burial considerations. This is a time to honor and remember your loved one in a meaningful way. **Utilize your family representative as you deem appropriate in making these decisions.**

- ❑ Choose funeral services from a reputable business, while considering price, location and services offered. Your family pastor may be a resource for recommendations.
- ❑ Make an appointment with the chosen funeral home to decide what type of services will work best for your family's situation.
- ❑ Funeral homes offer an array of services, including receipt, transportation, and preparation of the deceased; filing the death certificate; providing staff for services; ceremony arrangements; cemetery arrangements; assistance with flowers; etc. These services will be explained to you.
- ❑ Ask for specifics about what is included in the charges. The funeral home will give you an itemized list of charges. Secure payment arrangements in writing.

There may be specific information that will need to be provided by you to the funeral home. Be prepared to offer the following:

- ❑ Full name of the deceased;
- ❑ Address and phone;
- ❑ Date and place of birth;
- ❑ Date and place of death;
- ❑ Social security number;
- ❑ Occupation;
- ❑ Marital status;
- ❑ Education level;
- ❑ Father's name;
- ❑ Mother's name (including maiden name);
- ❑ Veteran status (war, division, rank)
- ❑ Church membership;
- ❑ Clubs, organizations (or other personal information for obituary);

- ❑ Photo of your loved one, if preparation for viewing will be done;
- ❑ Order death certificates; (recommended: at least 12 copies);
- ❑ Religious/cultural rites that may be desired;

Time and place of funeral or memorial service desired with advice of chosen clergy.

You may be faced with making decisions relative to the burial or cremation of your loved one(s), if these decisions have not previously been made by the deceased. The following information may assist you as you are faced with these issues.

For burial:

Select a casket and decide whether or not, at presentation, the casket will remain open or closed. A casket may be obtained from the funeral home or other sources. Caskets vary widely in terms of pricing and materials.

- ❑ Decide on clothing and jewelry for your loved one.
- ❑ Decide if there are any items that you may like to have interred with them, such as letters from family members, pictures, mementos, etc. Before adding any item to the casket, (such as a favorite piece of jewelry) consider whether the item might bring you comfort in the future if you saved it. You may want to consider how you might handle a situation in which a friend (particularly in terms of teen traffic deaths) may wish to place a memento in your loved one's casket.
- ❑ Decisions regarding headstones/gravesite markers may be made at a later time.

For cremation:

- ❑ An urn may be secured from the funeral home or other sources, or a family heirloom (for example, a vase or beautiful wooden box) may be used. Decisions regarding appropriate receptacles may be deferred until a later time.
- ❑ You may consider spreading the cremains in a loved one's favorite place, but it would be appropriate to inquire about local health ordinances.

Types of Remembrance Services

Services provide an opportunity for you and people who knew your loved one to pay respects and express grief. Services may aid the family in dealing with the reality of the death, saying farewell, honoring their loved one, and receiving support.

- A funeral service generally precedes a cemetery burial or cremation.
- A memorial service may be held at any time after the death and may or may not be directly connected with burial or cremation. Often, these services are held after interment.
- Memorial or funeral services are usually held at a church or funeral home. Alternative locations may include a family residence, fraternal halls, Masonic Temple, park, etc. If choosing an alternate location, you will need to obtain permission and consider certain logistics, such as adequate seating, parking, sound system, etc.
- A wake, visitation or viewing is an opportunity to view the loved one's body and greet family members prior to the burial or cremation but occasionally after the cremation. It may be public or private and may be held the day before the service or in the hour or two just prior to the funeral/memorial service.
- A graveside service is conducted at the cemetery to dedicate the grave and commit the body of the deceased. Families may choose to hold a graveside service only in lieu of a funeral service or memorial service. This is usually a simple service. Most cemeteries provide a tent and chairs.
- A Military Honors service may be provided at the graveside for veterans that served during a time of war and were honorably discharged. For eligibility information: 1-800-827--1000. For burial benefits for Veterans, see the following website: http://www.cem.va.gov/cem/bbene_burial.asp

Planning the Service

There are many details to consider. This is a time when your family can take compassionate steps that honor the wishes or legacy of your lost loved one. Sometimes in the midst of deep grief and the emotional challenges of the situation, families may not think of special considerations that would have been meaningful for them. The following suggestions could prove helpful.

- Select pallbearers, both active and honorary, if desired. Consider the physical demands required of active pallbearers.
- Plan for flower arrangements and delivery, including the disposition or donation of flowers after the service.
- Plan transportation for family and guests to the funeral and burial site, if applicable.
- Have family or friends serve as greeters or ushers, especially if the service is large.
- Consider a memorial record book to be placed in the church or funeral home lobby for attendees to sign. Such books may be purchased at the funeral home or alternate location, such as a religious bookstore.
- Memorial cards are optional and may be purchased from the funeral home.
- Consider using a funeral coach/limousine.
- Provide the location of and directions to the cemetery.
- You may wish to consider having the service audio-taped or video-taped.
- You may wish to provide a photo and/or a collage of pictures, or a memory table.

- Give consideration to music, and/or special song(s) that your family member enjoyed to be used during the service.

- Give consideration to the selection of Scripture, meaningful readings, personal writings or poems to be used in the service. Consider having a family member or friend serve as a reader during the service.

- Consider having one or more family members or special friends speak. It may be helpful to give them some idea of what is expected and a time limit. You may desire to have them review their comments with close family members ahead of time.

- You may consider memorials in lieu of or in addition to flowers, such as donations to charity, scholarship fund, etc.

- Consider reserving a space for family and/or special groups or clubs in which your loved one may have been involved.

- Consider a reception after the ceremony. Some churches are willing to provide a family meal after the graveside service either in the home or at the church site.

- Consider the involvement of surviving children or siblings, specifically younger children. They are often the "forgotten mourners."

After the Funeral

Once the services and interment have been concluded, there may be a tremendous sense of loneliness. You may find yourself tackling what seems like mounds of paperwork and procedural issues.

This can be complicated by delays in receiving your appropriate paperwork. If your family member was involved in a collision in which a crime was committed, there will be additional legal obligations and court appearances.

Don't be surprised if calls, visits and the close attention you have had since the tragedy begin falling away. This is normal. While you may not feel like returning to your old life, others must. Don't be offended. Continue to call on your friends as needed, but use this time to grieve with the understanding that this process is not identical for everyone.

Helpful Steps:

- Do not hesitate to seek counseling. Ask trusted friends, clergy or other family members for recommendations.
- Speak to your physician if you are having trouble sleeping or are experiencing anxiety.
- Grief is exhausting. You may feel very tired or alternate between bursts of energy and complete lethargy. This is normal.
- Sleep and rest as needed, but also make sure you are getting plenty of fresh air. Accept the offers of friends or family to get out of the house.
- Exercise as you are able to clear your mind and reduce stress.

Things to avoid:

- Avoid — for a time — making major, life-altering decisions, such as selling your home because of the power of memories. Try to allow yourself to move through the grief process prior to further altering your life significantly.

- Avoid withdrawal from family members or friends.
- Try to allow yourself to get into a regular routine as quickly as you are able. Since everyone grieves differently, there is no time expectation or limit regarding how you go about this.

What to expect:

In the coming years, you will experience a wide range of emotions. As you move toward wellness and healing, you must understand that there will be setbacks along the way. Some of these may occur unexpectedly, as a song or a fragrance reminds you of your loved one. Holidays may be difficult to celebrate. The anniversary of your loved one's tragic death may prove overwhelming.

These setbacks are normal. Take time to work through each stage. Don't let others try to dictate the pace or the process through which you must move to deal with the hard times. Always try to remember that what was indicated at the beginning of this guide remains true. You are not alone in this process.

There are multiple resources available to you through family, friends and others who have experienced similar tragedies. By using these resources, you will develop strength to conquer the setbacks and continue to move forward on the road to hope.

Resources

Our Families of Highway Fatalities members have found the following books, reading materials and web sites helpful on their respective journeys. We are passing these resources along to you in hope that some of them may help you on your road to healing.

Find Help Online:

- http://www.centering.org
- http://www.griefhelp.org
- http://www.madd.org/victim-services
- http://www.griefnet.org
- http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/grief-and-loss/
- http://www.journeyofhearts.org/
- http://www.starr.org/training/tlc
- http://www.compassionbooks.com/
- http://www.healingthespirit.org/resources/grief-words/
- http://www.opentohope.com
- http://www.griefshare.org/findagroup
- http://grief.com
- http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/index.htm
- http://griefsjourney.com
- http://www.scbar.org/PublicServices/FindaLawyer.aspx

Books:

- A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies by Anne McCracken & Mary Semel;

- After the Darkest Hour, The Sun Will Shine Again: A Parent's Guide to Coping with the Loss of a Child by Elizabeth Mehren;

- Dealing With Sudden & Unexpected Death: A Handbook For Survivors by Beth Vaughn Cole, Jan Harvey, Leslie Miles;

- Finding Hope When A Child Dies: What Other Cultures Can Teach Us

by Sukie Miller with Doris Ober;

- Grief Steps: 10 Steps to Regroup, Rebuild and Renew After Any Life Loss by Brook Noel;
- No Time For Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, Injustice After a Tragic Death by Janice Harris Lord;
- The Mourning Handbook: Comprehensive Resource Offering Practical Advice by Helen Fitzgerald;
- On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross; Healing a Father's Grief by William H. Schatz;
- First You Die: Learn to Live After the Death of Your Child by Marie Levine;
- Streams in the Desert by L.B. Cowman and James Reimann;
- A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis
- Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love: Daily Meditations to Help You Through the Grieving Process by Ray-mond R. Mitsch and Lynn Brookside;
- Good Grief by Lolly Winston;
- Finding Your Way After Your Spouse Dies by Marta Felber;
- Through a Season of Grief: Devotions for Your Journey from Mourning to Joy by Bill Dunn and Kathy Leonard;
- Healing a Spouse's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Husband or Wife Dies by Alan D. Wolfelt.
- How to Go On Living When Someone Dies by Dr. Therese Rondo

Concluding Thoughts

Please have faith that the overwhelming grief you are now experiencing will begin to lessen over time. You may never have true "closure," but you will eventually be better prepared to deal with this loss and begin to experience once again the positives that life has to offer.

The Families of Highway Fatalities group has trained peer counselors who are available as a resource during this time. If you ever need to talk with us, please don't hesitate to call us at 803-896-8171.

Acknowledgements

The Highway Patrol and Families of Highway Fatalities express sincere gratitude to those who contributed to the creation of this guide.

We hope it will help many people more easily navigate through the first few months by having guidance from those who have been there.

Office of Highway Safety and Justice Programs
South Carolina Department of Public Safety