

Compassionate Guide

...Through the difficult days ahead

*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 received the most devastating news of your life. You have lost a precious and beloved family member in a traffic collision.

Please accept our most sincere sympathies and condolences.

You are not alone. Tragically, more than 800 people die annually on South Carolina highways.

For this reason, the Families of Highway Fatalities group was created. This group exists to provide support in the days, weeks, months and years after these tragic losses and to encourage and motivate families to move forward to become a collective voice for changed driving behaviors and safer highways, so that others may not experience similar tragedies.

This book contains advice and guidance based on personal experiences to help you navigate some of the issues with which you may be faced in the days ahead. We sincerely hope the information in this booklet will lessen some of the stress you face right now, and, perhaps, 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. As such, it is important that you and your family are treated with respect and dignity. Do not be afraid to ask for something that is important to you as you deal with this tragic loss. If there are legal or other issues that might prohibit your requests from being realized, 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 delegate tasks and ask for help;
- the option to honor your loved one in the way that seems best to you during your loved one's memorial service and in the days to come;
- the right to make any personal decisions, with advisement from funeral directors, regarding how your loved one's service will be conducted;
- the right to legally coordinate the disposition of your loved one's possessions;
- the right to handle media situations as you see fit.



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 with which you need to deal.

Notify next of kin once you receive the news:

Ensure that 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 or radio news. Notify the most immediate family members first (i.e., spouse, children, or parents). Notification of immediate family members in person is preferable. 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 that there is someone available to handle this and that they are prepared to answer questions at your discretion.

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

A critical first step may be to appoint a trusted relative or friend to serve as your "family representative." There will be visitors, phone calls, funeral arrangements, and a multitude of decisions. Someone more detached from the loss that can deal with some of these issues could prove very valuable to your family. **Please pass this guide along to your appointed "family representative" to assist in the development of immediate plans.**



Suggested “To-Do List” for the Family Representative

Your most important job right now as the appointed "family representative" is to see that your family member or friend 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 assisting 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 the family's church and/or pastor to provide support and comfort to the family.
- With the family’s permission, consider calling a 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 of contacts.
- Insulate the family from potentially hurtful people or comments.

Household management/maintenance:

- Prepare for food. Clean out the refrigerator and make counter space.
- Tidy the house. Take out the garbage. Sweep or vacuum. Do a quick cleaning 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 and do minor cleaning of 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 an announcement/obituary. The funeral director may assist with this. There are usually time deadlines and a fee if the obituary exceeds a certain length.

Immediate legal issues paperwork:

- Notify all insurance companies: life, home, and auto, as well as 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, and executor of estate, and locate the wof of the deceased as applicable.
- Notify employers/schools of loved one and of immediate family members.
- Notify bank and/or creditors.

Legal documents that the family may need:

- 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 their 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. You may find contact information about your local Highway Patrol Troop at www.scdps.gov/schp, or by calling SCHP at 803-896-7920.

Whether the investigating 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.
- A completed Financial Responsibility Form (an insurance form which will be provided to you for the vehicle involved in the collision). The form 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/fhf.



Making Funeral Arrangements

The family representative is vital in the handling of routine decisions and shielding the family from unwanted attention during this time. However, 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.

The family representative should assist family members as appropriate in 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; ceremonial 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 number;
- Date and place of birth;
- Date and place of death;
- Social Security number;
- Occupation;
- Marital status;
- Educational 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(s) of your loved one, if preparation for viewing will be done;
- Ordering of Death Certificates; (at least 12 copies recommended);
- Religious/cultural rites that may be desired;
- Time and place of funeral or memorial service desired with advisement by 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, jewelry, etc. Before adding any item to the casket, 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, provided local health ordinances will allow.

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 these services are often 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 an alternate location is chosen, you may need to obtain permission and to consider certain logistics, such as 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. Occasionally a visitation may be held to greet family members 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 in lieu of a funeral service/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, call 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 in the years ahead. 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.
- Consider having the service audio-taped or video-taped.
- 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.



Resources

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

Websites:

<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.grieflossrecovery.com/grief>
<http://www.healingthespirit.org/resources/grief-words>
<http://www.opentohope.com>
<http://www.griefshare.org/findagroup>
<http://www.grief.com>
<http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org/index.htm>
<http://www.griefsjourney.com>

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;



Concluding Thoughts

It is our hope that you will find 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 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 to you. If you ever need to talk with us, please don't hesitate to call us at 803-896-8171.



Acknowledgements

The SC 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

