



D64 No Family Left Alone: The Family Assistance Unit Within the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be familiar with the current role of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Science as it pertains to family assistance. The recently implemented Family Assistance Unit will be described and current responsibilities of the program will be explained. Future goals for family assistance will also be expressed. This presentation will highlight the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences (HCIFS) development of the Family Assistance Unit and attempt to illustrate the need for improved family assistance services within all Medical Examiner's Systems.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by contributing to understanding the challenges in assisting grieving family members and identifying the need for a specialized program to assist with family assistance services within medical examiner and coroner jurisdictions.

In January 2012, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences initiated the Family Assistance Unit with the addition of a grant-funded Victim Assistance Specialist position. This unit functions to bridge the gap between medicolegal death investigation services and family assistance by providing support services and community resources to the surviving family members. These services include assisting the family on the scene, acute grief counseling, referrals to non-profit social service organizations, and notifications of death. As a grief counseling professional, the Victim Assistance Specialist is able to offer compassionate support, active listening, and identify appropriate resources for them throughout the grieving process. Having a single point of contact for the family members within our large multi-division agency allows for continuity of information regarding the status of the case.

The act of informing family members of a death requires a responsible, well-trained, and sensitive individual who is able to cope with this mutually traumatizing experience. Family members of deceased victims have a wide range of needs and reactions to the sudden and untimely death of their loved ones. Consequently, the individuals who deliver the death notifications and the manner in which they carry out this duty factor significantly in the immediate and subsequent grief response experienced by the family. Until recently, Forensic Investigators performed notifications of death via telephone when the family was not able to be notified at a scene or hospital. While in-person notifications are always preferred, time and distance can make this impractical in a jurisdiction as large as Harris County. In March 2012, HCIFS and the Family Assistance Unit entered into a partnership with area chaplaincy organizations to provide in-person notifications of death. The chaplains are trained by the Family Assistance Unit to deliver death notifications with accuracy, sensitivity, and respect for the deceased and their families.

Future goals of the Family Assistance Unit include extending the time frame and number of contacts provided to family for assistance. With the addition of more staffed positions, the Family Assistance Unit will also be able to attend a larger number of death scenes with the Forensic Investigator in order to provide in-person acute grief counseling to the family of the deceased. The Family Assistance Unit is also working to provide workshops to employees of the Institute of Forensic Sciences that will address issues of self care, debriefing, and coping skills.

The Family Assistance Unit within the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences is the first of its kind in the United States to offer extended services to families by chaplains and licensed social workers. These professionals add a depth of personal service that is often lacking in the typical scientific medicolegal environment, shifting the focus from management and care of the decedent to that of the surviving family members.

Medical Examiner, Grief, Family Assistance