

We Regret to Inform You: Trauma Notifications

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Our episode today focuses on the somber, challenging, emotionally impactful and often unsupported process of notifying next of kin that their loved one has either died or suffered a traumatic physical injury due to criminal violence or an accident. We are pleased to have Dr. Staci Beers as a guest, honored. Dr. Beers is one of the nation's foremost experts on trauma notifications. She's a Victim Services Coordinator with the FBI's Victim Services Division. She also has the privilege of serving as a crisis response canine handler with the FBI. This is a real treat. I can't tell you how excited, Dr. Beers, that we are to have you. Welcome to *The Beat*.

Dr. Staci Beers

01:03

Thank you so much for having me.

Donelan

01:05

Absolutely. So, before we get to the topic and the subject of notifications, I always like to start these off with the same question: How did you get into the world of victim services? Like what's the background? What's the path, and how it got you here?

Beers

01:19

So, I was a criminal justice minor in college and learned a lot about the criminal and the criminal justice system. There really wasn't a focus on victims at that time, and so I started to volunteer at a rape crisis center and really found my niche supporting victims of different violent crimes. I went on to get my master's degree in social work so I could continue that effort and I was very lucky to work at an agency that served crime victims. Different kinds of victims, whether it's homicide, sexual assault, child abuse, a robbery, things like that.

I started our first homicide response team in Pennsylvania. And that's really where I started to see that there wasn't much training that law enforcement receives related to death notifications / trauma notifications. So, I've worked in the criminal justice system in many different agencies from a law enforcement background to prosecution, probation, parole, child advocacy. And then 12 years ago, I joined the FBI's Victim Services Division.

Donelan

02:17

So, you really have seen sort of the entire world from the response, which would be the local police, to all the services that follow along that continuum through the prosecution process and all of that. It seems to me you've had the 360-degree view.

Beers

02:35

Yeah, and now I'm in the federal system, which is a very interesting perspective as well. And it's really nice to kind of bring all of that together.

Donelan

02:41

So, I want to spend most of our time talking about the training element and sort of the background on that, but let's start off with the next of kin notification. When we're talking about that throughout this episode, what does that mean?

Beers

02:54

So, the next of kin can be a variety of different individuals, you know, you obviously have your biological family, but you also have chosen family and we learned that in Pulse. Not every family member was biological; it was chosen family. So, we need to be cognizant about how family is really defined and so for us, you know, we really kind of look at the wide aperture. So, when we're looking at a situation when we're doing a trauma notification, we're really trying to dissect who's the family.

We do that with our analysts to see, "Okay, like, what's that circle look like? If we drop a pebble in the pond, what does that look like?" Now, that doesn't mean we're going out notifying 10 family members for a victim. That's not what that means. But we really try to figure out, "Okay, is there some cultural issues we should be aware of in this particular situation?" Pulse really, really highlighted that for us. And so, you know, who is the closest person to that deceased individual. And it could be, you know, your legal next of kin, which could be mom, dad, spouse, child, that sort of thing, but we don't just keep it to that. We really do look at a wider aperture when we're talking about next of kin.

Donelan

03:55

So, let's go to your personal experience and then what you saw as you progressed throughout your career. But talk about those first few moments or first experiences where you said, "Uh-oh, there's a gap here. We've got a really huge missing element." There is no training for folks with this very delicate, very highly charged emotional exercise, so to say. It's impactful for not only the people who are getting the news, but for the people who are delivering the news as well. Do you recall those moments where you were like, "Oh, no. We've got a problem. We've got to fill this gap?"

Beers

04:32

Yeah, absolutely, because what we know is that when we're going to do a death notification / trauma notification, we're trying to change the language now, because we don't always do notifications when somebody is deceased. We can use this model to notify families that their child has been exploited or that their loved one has been kidnapped, those sorts of things, so we're really trying to change the language around this. But I remember when I started in Victim Services and going out with law enforcement, I knew that I was going to be changing someone's life forever and there was a lot of heaviness and my anxiety was very, very high.

And then I'm partnered with law enforcement who are always in control. They're definitely focused. They're highly trained, and they were as nervous as I was. And I'm thinking to myself, "Don't you all get training?" And what we learned is that a lot of times there isn't training in law enforcement academies. They're focused on the tactical training, safety, which I completely understand. And yet, there's this other piece that if you're anxious going out to do a trauma notification, victims pick up on that pretty quickly. And you're the one that needs to have some semblance of order, right?

So, one of the things we started to do was really look at, "Okay, how can we get this information out?" And what I will say is, after the Navy Yard shootings several years ago, we definitely identified a gap. When we have been asked as the FBI to come in and assist local authorities with doing death notifications—I want to be really clear that the FBI doesn't do fatality management. It's not what we do. That's the coroner. It's the medical examiner's office, and it's also local law enforcement.

And yet, when we have these mass violence incidents, sometimes, local authorities will come and ask us, "Can you help us do, you know, these trauma notifications?" All of our victim specialists—we have 171 victim specialists in all 56 field offices have this training—they know how to do it. They can do a trauma notification. And yet, there's more to it and we have a team of two. It's always a law enforcement leader or an officer or an agent, whoever that may be partnered with one of our victim specialists. And so, we thought, "Hmm, really, let's focus on how can we do a training for the larger law enforcement world." And so, we were very lucky that through our active shooter initiative, through our Office of Partner Engagement, that we receive funding to develop an online platform that is free of charge for officers to take this training. It's really designed for law enforcement agencies to be able to pull people from the road to take it. It takes about an hour. People can go as in depth or as on the surface as they would like. And so, it goes through the four-step model. It demonstrates the model in a training video. There's a lot of resources at the end, and so that's where we started with this.

To date—we launched this in 2015; Director Comey, at the time, launched this during National Crime Victims' Rights week in April of 2015. To date, we have around 30,000 allied professionals who've taken this training. So, we're really excited about the breadth and width of where this has gone. Obviously, we would love to see more. So, hopefully, with this podcast we'll get there.

Donelan

07:26

And so, the name of the training, it's the FBI's Trauma Notification course, it's called, "We Regret to Inform You."

Beers

07:32

Yes.

Donelan

07:32

Okay. And as you mentioned, it's free of charge.

Beers

07:35

It's free. Yes, it's absolutely available online free of charge. People can take it on their cell phones, you know, wherever they have access, you know, capabilities to reach out. And it can be found at www.deathnotification.psu.edu.

Donelan

07:52

And we'll revisit that again at the end of the episode. I don't want to be remiss in the fact that this is a project that you've worked hand-in-hand—the FBI has worked hand-in-hand—with Penn State University. Tell me about that.

Beers

08:05

So, our Office of Partner Engagement had a relationship with them surrounding their active shooter initiative. They did a lot of videos and training together. And so, when we decided to develop an online platform, our Office of Partner Engagement connected us with Penn State University, who is very happy to assist us. And so, the training is actually hosted on their servers and all the updates and things like that, Penn State helps us with regularly.

Donelan

08:32

Let me dial back and talk about the death notification. So, for those who haven't really considered it—and I don't know if you would liken it to a science. What would you liken it to?

Beers

08:41

It's a process, and it's a four-step process. And what we found is that putting a process around it really allows those of us doing the notifications to really focus on the steps. This is not a model that the FBI developed. We looked at many different models and we really focused and ended up on the Mothers

Against Drunk Driving four-step process. It's evidence informed. They've used it for many, many years. And I will also tell you that Concerns of Police Survivors shares this model with law enforcement when they do line of duty deaths and so it was a natural fit for us. So, the four-step model is that of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Donelan

09:18

Let's go a little bit into some of that, because it's not just as simple as you're going to tell someone that their loved one died. It's not just knocking on the door and delivering the news.

Beers

09:28

Correct.

Donelan

09:29

It's the words you choose to use. It's who you have with you. Can you go into some of those details?

Beers

09:33

Absolutely. So, the first step is planning, the second step is preparation, the third step is delivery, which is the knocking on the door, and the fourth step is follow-up. What we found is that people don't spend enough time doing the planning and preparation, we just literally get in a car and go, and that's step three. So, when we look at the first two steps, the planning and the preparation, the planning involves how was the victim identified? Do you know how victims are identified in your jurisdiction? Is it forensic identification? Is it visual identification? The one thing we know is that you have to be 100 percent certain on how the individual was identified because it's the first question that the family will ask. It's also important because the last thing you want to do is do an inadvertent notification that it's the wrong person, so we want to make sure we know how the victim was identified.

The second piece of that is, "Okay, so who's your team? What does your team look like? If you are going out into a community that may speak different languages, do you have somebody on your team that can communicate in that language?" Because that is really important when people are in crisis. Even though they could be bilingual or trilingual, sometimes they are more comfortable speaking in their native language. And so really looking at the makeup of the community that you are going out to support and provide this notification is really key.

We're also looking at, "Okay, so what are your SOPs? What are your standard operating procedures in your community? Who's supposed to do the notifications? You know, who does it? What does it look like? You know, who pronounces death in your community?" Because it varies. It really varies between different jurisdictions.

We also want to know how do you identify the next of kin to your original question, like who are they or where do they live? If they don't live in our certain area, well, then who can make the notification? What we know is that most notifications are made telephonically. That is not best practice for a lot of reasons. One on which, we all live on our cell phones, so we don't really know where people are. They could be at a child's daycare. They could be in the grocery store. They could be driving down the highway, and they could have a major medical issue. That is a problem. But that is the number one way that people in general are notified about the death of their loved one.

So, it's our perspective that we try to do an in-person notification at all times. Part of this process is we also have a remote notification process and that's part of the delivery. But saying that, you know, we also want to make sure when we're preparing to do these, we want to know as much as possible about the next of kin. Things such as at the address where we're going, are there officer safety issues? Are there child protection issues? Were there medical calls for service, because if there were lots of medical calls for service at that particular address, maybe I want a medic around the corner waiting because God forbid something happens and that person has a medical reaction. So, we really look at the large scope of that.

Additionally, we want to look at what are the emotional and physical responses to trauma that are common. People have a variety of different reactions and, you know, sometimes people aren't comfortable with those reactions, so we talk about it in the training so that they get a little bit more comfortable. So, those are the first two steps and by the time people go to the delivery, they should have their entire script and their entire process ready so that when they make that knock on the door, they're able to deliver that notification in a very informed, professional, and dignified manner.

Donelan

12:51

You know, as you explained step one and step two and you described that the normal process or the sort of the standard, old-fashioned way of doing things is jump in the car and go—

Beers

13:00

Mm-hmm.

Donelan

13:00

—but that's step three, just that alone highlights for people that there's so much more that needs to go into these trauma notifications. If jumping in the car is step three, you've skipped two entire steps that are so in depth and so important. But it's usually—and correct me if I'm wrong here or go into further detail—why have we been resorting to just jumping in the car? Why haven't we been stopping and thinking about these things? Is it time? We need to get those notifications done and we don't have time to do those things?

Beers

13:32

I think it's timing, but I also think that we, in law enforcement, are very reactionary, right? Law enforcement runs into things that most people don't, so does firefighters. There's a reason they call them first responders, right? And again, it's not a criticism. People may say, "Well, Staci, who has time to do the planning and preparation?" You can do that in a very short amount of time. This does not take hours to do. Most law enforcement agencies, you go right into your communication center, your com center, boom, run the address, you're rocking and rolling. You could be on the road already going out to that address getting that information. We did it all the time in my former department.

And so, saying that, even though I'm talking about step one and two, these things don't take hours to do because in mass violence incidents, we're always up against the clock because the media is reporting, right? So, we want to make sure that we're getting out there. So, this process actually is not overly time intensive. It's a thoughtful process. So, yeah, to your point, I think that's why. We're first responders, and we're used to getting out there and getting ahead of things, especially in a traumatic situation.

Donelan

14:28

So, you took the words right out of my mouth, because I was immediately thinking, and I'm so glad that you're hitting on the fact that this doesn't take a lot of time because the media... You don't want families finding out on the news or on a tweet that their loved one has died. And I know everybody is pushing to make sure that doesn't happen. So, it is that like go, go, go, go, go, but what you're describing, yes, at first glance, it does sound like, "Well, that's a lot of time. I don't have time for that."

Beers

14:55

Exactly.

Donelan

14:55

But that's not the point.

Beers

14:56

No.

Donelan

14:57

It's just stopping and thinking. It's awareness. It's reading the room. It's walking in with knowledge versus just walking in cold, it sounds like to me.

Beers

15:05

Well, and the thing is we know that information is power, so the more information that we're armed with, the more in control we can feel when we go out to do these notifications. So, we can control what we say, right, and how we put the information out there. We can't control other people, so we just have to be prepared for the actual reaction. And the other thing is, when we talk about delivery, it's a very simplified process. We're not going into great detail. We're confirming who is at the door. That they're the next of kin. We ask to come into the house and sit down. And the reason we do that is because we want to protect somebody's privacy.

We ask people to sit down because we don't want them to fall down. And then, very simply, we tell them in one or two sentences: "There's been an active shooter incident and your son—say the name—has died as a result of his injuries that was sustained at this incident." And then that's it, like that is it. You don't need to fill the space. You don't have to use big words. Very simplified language, because when people are in crisis, they can't hear a lot of noise.

The other thing in this model is we have a primary and we have a support in our team. The primary is the only person talking and, generally, that's a law enforcement officer and the reason for that is because we don't want people cross talking over each other. We don't want any confusion. So, the primary person is the one doing the notification and the support person is really doing the assessment. You know, are there kids in the house? Are there older adults in the house? You know, are there pets in the house? Are there things in front of us that maybe we need to remove, so they're not grabbing a candlestick and throwing it because there's a lot of different responses.

And then that support person is there to really provide ongoing services. A lot of times it's a victim specialist, a victim advocate within a law enforcement agency. And so, that person really is providing a lot of the support as well as the follow-up.

Donelan

16:45

Would it be correct then, you've got the two person team going in and the one who's delivering the message, the to-the-point, very clear message, while the other person, the support person, initially is doing the other things that the other person can't do, because they're eye-contact delivering this message. They're visually scanning the room.

Beers

17:03

Yes.

Donelan

17:03

They're looking out for issues, that sort of thing, so that the other person can concentrate on just talking to whomever is in front of them that they're delivering this news to?

Beers

17:12

Yes, that's exactly right.

Donelan

17:14

Talk to me about, you know, agencies or someone who you've taken through this, right, and sort of the initial reactions and then sort of the end product. Like, did you see the light bulbs go off? Has it made things easier? What kind of feedback have you been getting?

Beers

17:29

So, we got a lot of positive feedback about the online training. What we actually got a lot of feedback about also is that people were hungry for more information. So, it was great, because this information was launched and I'm like, "We did it." And then there was like, "Well, we want more." So, what we've done over the past several years, the FBI has led an initiative called the Trauma Notification Team within our own home. And so, it's our mission to train a team of individuals, special agents, task force officers, certainly our victim specialists within all 56 divisions, so that if we are asked to do a notification by local law enforcement in, let's say, a mass violence incident, we have teams that are ready to go that can be force multipliers.

Of course, we would never forward lean, it would always be at the request of local law enforcement, but yesterday, we trained our 15th division out of 56, so I'm very happy about that. We have quite a few more in the queue, but this training, it takes the four-step process, and we actually apply it to a scenario. And so, we don't do role-plays, but what this training does is it takes that four-step model, it applies it to 10 scenarios that are real scenarios and each of those scenarios are culturally based. So, we have situations that we present that have language barriers, international considerations, older adults, so we have a variety of different vignettes.

And one of the things that the biggest compliments that we've got about this is that it's real. It's just not made up and there's a lot of depth in this scenario. So, basically, what we do is we teach it, they do it, and then they present it back to us. And we've gotten a lot of positive feedback about that. We've also trained three external communities at this point. Some law enforcement, some emergency management, and what's really consistent in the evaluations and also the pre- and post-tests is that applying the model to real life situations really helps the learning curve.

Donelan

19:21

You mentioned language, et cetera. Let's talk a little bit more about that and the different scenario and the fact that it is real. You do have to be open and honest about how people... Like there's textbook, but then there's real life, right? We may be in a neighborhood where they don't trust the police, so a uniformed officer walking into that house, you're already starting off on the wrong foot. Sexual orientation, you know, all those different things, does that all take that into account?

Beers

19:49

It does and one of the things that we teach in this model in the planning and preparedness is know your community. Know what historical traumas have happened in that community. Know what racial traumas have happened in that community. Know if there's any prior traumatic experiences, so look at all the mass violence incidents we've had, right, around the country over the past few years. If we have to go back into those communities, you know, and most of these death notifications, frankly, these are your homicides, they're your motor vehicle accidents, your suicides, your overdoses. That is generally what law enforcement, you know, faces every single day.

They're not facing these mass violence incidents, but our perspective is if they use this four-step model in their daily work, if a mass violence incident occurs in their jurisdiction, they're prepared to go out and do these notifications. But again, knowing their community, meeting their community where they're at, really, really important. Because to your point, if we don't recognize the pre-trauma equilibrium that exists in that community before we walk in, then we're not prepared. And so, that is something we very much talk about in this training, and it's very much ingrained in the scenarios.

Donelan

20:53

And do you think people overestimate or underestimate the impact of that first meeting? I mean, the families in so many of these cases, and I'm using families again, you mentioned that the next of kin notification may be being made to someone beyond family member, but let's just talk about that, as an example. That first meeting, that initial notification, this is a family, for the most part, with investigations. You're going to be dealing with throughout the investigation.

Beers

21:18

That's correct.

Donelan

21:19

And that's your first starting point. I mean, it seems so key that you have to do everything to make sure that it can go as well as it can go.

Beers

21:26

That's a really good point and we really talk a little bit about this, because it's your first point when you're meeting someone, right? And law enforcement talks about, you know, building rapport, whether it's with a subject, a victim, whoever. Their first interaction is really planning about how they're going to build rapport. And so, I don't think it's really given much thought. We just go out. We do the notification.

However, again, victims are volunteers. They do not have to talk with us. We need victims sometimes for investigations, so if we don't get this right, you've got one chance to do it right. If you don't get this right, they don't need to cooperate. They don't need to talk with us. And you know, I go back to talk and saying, you know, the first step in getting this right is getting trained. And that's our perspective.

Donelan

22:07

And it cannot be underestimated. So, let's talk about the actual deliverers, the message bearers, supporting them. You hear these stories for those who are willing to talk about them. Officers who've had to turn around and notify a family, it can be so traumatic for the officer. You know, it's a moment that they live with forever. Is there any sort of acknowledgement of that or provision to try and help officers or detectives or whoever it is that's going into these situations?

Beers

22:41

So, part of this model, I guess, I could say it's a five-step model, though it's really not an original part, but it's called post notification recap. So, after the death notification and the trauma notification is done, you know, getting in the car together, the team driving back to their headquarters or going to their next call—that's the time to process it. What we know, research has shown us, is when we talk it out, it gets out of our subconscious and we kind of put it out in the universe, we don't perseverate on it.

So, does that mean that some will impact us more than others? Absolutely. Some things are too close to home. One of the things we always say to our teams is that we want you here because you're volunteers, not voluntold. For example, if someone is doing a trauma notification involving a small child and maybe they have a small child in their life, that may not be a good fit. And it doesn't mean they can't do it, but it's all about being able to say, "You know what? I'm not going to raise my hand for that."

And again, that's really hard to teach first responders because they're so used to running into things. But sometimes we need to take a pause and say, "Are we the right person to do this?" I think of line of duty deaths, you know. We've had a lot of law enforcement who have experienced line of duty death, unfortunately.

And you have folks that are, you know, they're best friends in the department thinking, "Okay, I need to be doing a death notification, because the spouse knows me." And, you know, while I wouldn't say that's not true, what I will say is, you know, if that spouse hears your voice, and you are the one making the notification, every time they hear your voice, years down the road, because we know law enforcement supports families forever, they could be taken back to that time where you notified them. And so, I'm not saying it's not a good perspective. What I am saying is that it's something to be considerate of because we know that we want the best, right, for the families that we work with, and yet that might not be the best.

So, being able to actually take the time and think about, “What’s the impact on me?” And when it’s a situation that’s close to home, “What’s going to be the long-term impact with that family?” And what that looks like, it could be, you know, your best friend is the support person and the leader, the chief, whoever it is making that notification is the primary. So, that support person can continue to support the person forever and that family forever and yet, there is some separation between the actual voice who makes that notification.

Donelan

24:57

You know, on this show we talk a lot, and that’s what I love about *The Beat*. We talk a lot about ways that law enforcement agencies and the law enforcement community overall across this country are trying to be innovative and creating new ways to improve their relationships with the community. And it really comes down to being thoughtful and the increase in that. It’s no longer like, “This is just the way we do it and we’re going to keep doing it that way.” They’re becoming more thoughtful about every single aspect of what they do.

What has been the... And I know, you’ve touched on this in the beginning, we have 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the country. And I know that they are all trying to be innovative and thoughtful about improving relationships with the community, just because of what has gone over the past several years. This seems to be, to me, such a critical piece and even if it’s not necessarily the next of kin notification, it’s just that process of going through this training causes you to think, that it opens your mind to thinking about what else are we not doing right.

Beers

26:02

Absolutely. And I’ll tell you, it actually generates great conversation. You know, what are the plans in your departments, in your agencies? What are the plans for a line of duty death? What are the plans for a mass violence incident? Law enforcement often focuses on the tactical response, which completely understand. You know, we’ve got to mobilize, and we have to neutralize the cause of this traumatic incident and yet, there is phase two. And it really should be a parallel process, in that, what about the victims and how are we going to support the victims? And what does this look like?

So, looking at the crisis response plans for the community, where is trauma notification built into it? Where is family assistant built into it? And who are you going to assign to that role? So, it really is a much bigger response than just making a notification and trauma notification is a piece of the puzzle and a much larger puzzle. Frankly, it’s one piece of the larger puzzle.

Donelan

26:53

Exactly. What has me thinking about this, for instance, let’s say you have an LGBTQ victim, and you need to be thoughtful about that. And perhaps your agency has an LGBTQ affairs unit—

Beers

27:05

Mm-hmm.

Donelan

27:05

—already established, but perhaps you don't. And just the process of thinking about this and realizing, "Gosh, we really don't have anybody. We don't have anything for this." It causes that next step, which is one good thing begets another in my opinion.

Beers

27:18

It absolutely is and we're very lucky in the FBI. We have 10 directors' advisory committees involving all different kinds of backgrounds, whether it's bureau quality, whether it is the Native American population, women's group, veterans, all those kinds of things. One of the things that we talk about in this training is think about your local faith leaders. When we think about law enforcement kind of bridging the gap with their community and looking at innovation, I think a lot of agencies probably already have relationships with their faith leaders. And yet, how else can they use their faith leaders? So, for example, if we're going out to respond to a house of worship or a faith community, are we reaching out to the leader saying, "Hey, can you partner with us to do this?" Because they have a lot of times the instant rapport in the community, and they can be the ambassadors for law enforcement in those communities. Again, looking at how we can use community leaders to help us interact with the community, I think is key.

Donelan

28:12

And thus improving relationships with our communities, which is just—

Beers

28:16

Yes.

Donelan

28:16

—phenomenal. Talk to me a little bit about a mass incident when you have multiple victims, multiple families, multiple next of kin notifications. How does one prepare for that? Because you notify one family, word gets to the next family. How do you account for that? What's your best practice recommendation there?

Beers

28:36

The best practice for this is that each family has their own team of two, so if you have 12 deceased individuals you would have 24 trained team members. You would have a team of two assigned to each family. A lot of times they descend on the friends and family reception center, so making sure that they have private space that's away from the media, that's private for them. A lot of time it takes a minute for victims to be identified and so the coroner or medical examiner's office is working very quick to do that, but methodically, so it can take sometimes hours.

And so, what we find is best practice is in that time that that's happening, somebody from leadership, local law enforcement, meeting with those families, coming in perhaps every hour saying, "We know that you want to be notified and to find out if your loved one was in this location. We are doing everything we possibly can. We want to make sure that whenever we do notifications, they're 100 percent certain. You know, I'll be back in another hour to brief you, even if I don't have anything to say to you." That is best practice.

The other thing is that when it's time to do notification, let's say we have all 10 victims identified. It's a really good idea to do simultaneous notifications. The last thing you want is whisper down the alley. And so, if that means that we're at somebody's home then it's a text message to the team saying, "Green light. Been confirmed. Make your notification."

In these mass violence incidents, a lot of times we are merely confirming the death of their loved one. Because with social media and, you know, kids in school, they're already sharing that information. So sometimes, we are the messenger and we're met with a lot of anger because families want to know, "Well, why do we hear from somebody else and not you?" And the answer is we want to make sure we have 100 percent identification before we're doing the notification.

Now, does that make families feel better? No, it doesn't, but it's the truth. And I think that's the other thing, making sure that we're being truthful, honest, transparent with victims. If I've heard it once, I've heard 100 times from law enforcement. "You know, we can't tell the victims that it's an open investigation." And I will tell you that being here over the past 12 years, the agents that I work with, they're incredible with victims. And so, they don't talk about what they can't say to victims. They really talk about, "Okay, well, what can we say?" We can say this is an open investigation. We can say that we are doing our very best to try to get as many answers as possible. There's things that you can say and so, instead of focusing on what we can't say, let's focus on those things that we are able to share.

Donelan

30:59

You know, so much of this, as you sit here and talk about it, I keep thinking in the back of my mind, how would I want to be treated if it was my family? Or how would I want my mother treated if it was news that was being delivered about me? So, I'm thinking about those listeners who have, say, 30 officers and

we don't have a victim specialist on staff. This training, how much of it is this is compassion, it's common sense, it's "do unto others as you would want done upon you," and that this is doable even if you don't have the "victim specialist expert" on staff?

Beers

31:32

It is doable, because you might have chaplains and as I said, you might have those local faith leaders that you can bring into your agency to help you do this, so that you actually have force multipliers. You also might have victim advocates in a neighboring department, so maybe you have that conversation with that other department. So, I think the whole part of this is really planning on what this could look like in each community.

Donelan

31:53

You know, while I have you, Dr. Beers, we talked about the fact that you work with canines. And I'm starting to see more and more of that, with departments bringing on compassion canines to not only deal with their own personnel, but to also, they bring them along for these types of interactions. Are you seeing that starting to grow? And, and what do you think about the introduction of a therapy animal in those type settings? Is it, again, then just depend on what is the circumstances of this particular situation?

Beers

32:22

It does. One of the things that I will say is that, first of all, this could be a completely separate different podcast.

Donelan

32:28

Absolutely.

Beers

32:29

It's our position that we use facility dogs, and we do not use therapy dogs, because we work in a law enforcement agency and a lot of times the cases we are involved with involve an investigation. There's a whole process for facility dogs in their certification, so we don't use therapy dogs here. We have two facility dogs and, yeah, I could get into a lot of that.

Donelan

32:48

I bet. I bet. We're going to have you back to talk about the canine aspect, because that's certainly really interesting. And I'm just starting to see more bend and more acceptance of those types of animals into the law enforcement and to first responders agencies across the board.

Beers

33:03

And it's very different.

Donelan

33:03

You're seeing it in fire departments.

Beers

33:05

Yeah, it's different. They're there to support their staff. It's very different when they're interacting with victims.

Donelan

33:11

Mm-hmm. One thing we haven't talked about is the investigation, right?

Beers

33:14

Mm-hmm.

Donelan

33:15

So, in terms of the notification, in terms of establishing that relationship with the family and delivering this news very directly, there's also the investigation that oftentimes the person that's delivering the news has to turn around and then continue with their investigation. Do you account for that in the training?

Beers

33:32

Yeah, it is hard because in the smaller departments you don't really have choices. And so, you know, sometimes you're coming from the scene and we always do a little uniform check or whatever you're wearing to make sure, you know, one on one, that there's no blood, there's no evidence on you when you're going to knock on the door. That might seem, you know, common sense but when people's adrenaline are moving, you know, a lot of times we're just going, right? So—

Donelan

33:54

Right.

Beers

33:54

—we do talk about that. The one thing that we know is that when you're working closely with the victim family and you're the one in charge of the investigation, you're human, right? So, you get close with them. The one difference that we make in our training is that if we have a situation where we have the death of a subject or the person that committed the crime, and their family is getting the notification, a completely separate team should be interacting with the victims. So, you should have a team that's doing the subject family notification and another team working with the victims and that's really, really important. You know, victims have told us, you know, over and over again, "You're working with us," like they deserve to have that 100 percent separation.

Donelan

34:30

Got me thinking because my favorite shows to watch are British crime, British police shows. And I see that they always have a family officer.

Beers

34:37

Yep.

Donelan

34:38

And I don't see that here in the United States.

Beers

34:39

Yeah.

Donelan

34:40

So, one of the things I wanted to ask you if it's okay, do you see models elsewhere in Europe, where they have dedicated family officers and they do exactly what you just described? Where they have one separate officer who deals with the notification and working with the family and then the investigative officer is someone completely different.

Beers

34:59

You know, it's varied. It really is varied all across the world, so I know in the United Kingdom, they have Family Liaison Officers, FLOs. And yet in other countries, that's not the case, so I know it varies by country.

Donelan

35:12

In your opinion, is it a good idea?

Beers

35:14

You know, I think the whole point is this, as long as people are trained, you know, you could have the best law enforcement officer in the world who can solve the hardest crimes, but they might not be the best person to talk to victims, and I can't stress that enough. Just because you're a great investigator doesn't mean that you are the best in talking with victims.

Donelan

35:32

And that's okay?

Beers

35:34

Yeah, it totally is okay. We all have our strengths, so that's what I would say. I mean, there's training that goes into it. I've seen some other countries where they have the FLO, the Family Liaison Officer is the same one that's working on the investigation, and the water gets really muddy. And you know, who you align with. You're aligned with your agency. And when your agency asks you to do something and take on an investigation, that's your priority, and then the victims kind of fall by the wayside, so that can be problematic.

Donelan

35:59

So, just generally, could you share some insight on post notification resources that people may not be thinking about, but that are out there, that can be offered to families or the next of kin?

Beers

36:13

Absolutely. So, there's a lot of different resources out there. There's some national resources out there. And one of the things that I can say is that it's best practice really for looking at victim services agencies within that community, even though law enforcement may not have a victim advocate. Looking within the community for victim services agencies, sometimes even in the prosecutor's office, sometimes the medical examiner's and coroner's offices, they have incredible grief resources.

The other thing is, when someone is killed in a crime, victims can often apply for crime victims' compensation and that's available in all states. The amounts that are paid out are a little different per state, but crime victims' compensation is a wonderful resource for victims who have lost a loved one or had a loved one killed in a crime.

Donelan

36:57

When you're talking about the notification, is that something that those who are bearing the message, it's good information to be armed with, to have in their toolbox?

Beers

37:06

It is, and on the online portal, there is a coping with grief brochure that lists a lot of the national resources. That brochure is actually translated into 10 different languages, and so they can be downloaded, and they can be given to the victim families. But yeah, arming oneself with resources can be really, really helpful.

Donelan

37:25

I have absolutely loved our conversation and I want to make sure people know how to find the training, find the website, and all of that. So, can you go through that one more time about the name of the training and where to find it.

Beers

37:36

So, the name of the training, again, is We Regret to Inform You. We worked with Penn State University to develop it. It is hosted on their servers, so the training can be found at www.deathnotification.psu.edu, which is W-W-W-dot-D-E-A-T-H-N-O-T-I-F-I-C-A-T-I-O-N-dot-P-S-U-dot-E-D-U. We are going to be updating this training. We are going to be adding a few more videos to it, the videos on best practice and videos on not best practice, so that law enforcement can take a look at it and see how we can correct it.

Donelan

38:21

And then I hear there's exciting news: You're going to be developing an app?

Beers

38:24

Yes, so the app is forthcoming. And we're going to be working with our Office of Public Affairs to launch this out to our law enforcement partners. And so, it's in its beta form right now getting tested and as soon as it's ready to go, we're happy to launch it.

Donelan

38:39

That's going to be phenomenal to have that guidance right there in the palm of your hand. That's really exciting.

Beers

38:43

Mm-hmm.

Donelan

38:44

Thanks for sharing that with our listeners on *The Beat*. So, if anybody wants to get in touch with you, how would they do that?

Beers

38:50

The best way to get in touch with me is through the following email. It is traumanotificationteam@fbi.gov, which is T-R-A-U-M-A-N-O-T-I-F-I-C-A-T-I-O-N-T-E-A-M-at-F-B-I-dot-G-O-V.

Donelan

39:10

Dr. Beers, I cannot thank you enough for spending this time with us and talking about this topic. I wish it wasn't one that we had to talk about, but unfortunately it is. But I think that you have offered a light in an effort to help people navigate through this so that we can be better together. It's just phenomenal. Thank you so much.

Beers

39:32

You're welcome. Thank you very much for this opportunity.

Donelan

39:35

Absolutely. And thank you, everyone, for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

39:39

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

40:36

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