

DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
PRESENTATION TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SUBJECT: POLICIES AND PROCEDURES REGARDING THE NOTIFICATION OF
NEXT OF KIN OF WOUNDED AND DECEASED SERVICE MEMBERS

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, distinguished Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify in front of you today. Our Airmen have been continuously deployed and globally engaged in combat missions for more than sixteen straight years. Today, Airmen are fully engaged in the interdependent joint fight and stand prepared for rapid response and conflict across the globe.

Sixteen years of combat operations has taken its toll and many fine American Airmen have paid the ultimate sacrifice with their blood. The Air Force has suffered 366 combat related injuries requiring next of kin notification and 35 combat related deaths requiring next of kin notification since September 11, 2001. Upon the death of an Airman, no greater charge is upon us then to notify the next of kin in a timely and accurate manner with dignity, compassion and honor equal to their sacrifice. Policies and procedures for notifying next of kin are detailed in Air Force instruction. This is zero defect business. Rest assured, the Air Force takes this charge with the utmost seriousness.

To highlight our emphasis on the Casualty Services program, in the last 12 months the Air Force hired 38 new Casualty Assistance Representatives. 100% of them received just-in-time training within 60 days and formal training within 6 months as required by Air Force instruction. Our notification process is equally efficient. In the last 12 months the Air Force had 287 next of kin notifications. 93% of which were notified within 4 hours of a confirmed casualty determination as required by Air Force instruction. All of the remaining 7% were notified longer than 4 hours due to circumstances beyond our control (next of kin not home, outside the notification window, excess drive time).

Policies and Procedures

Overall casualty management is an integral function of command. Commanders at all levels are charged to give the Casualty Services Program their utmost personal attention. Prompt, accurate reporting, dignified and humane notification, and efficient, thorough, and compassionate assistance to the next of kin are the program's primary goals.

Current policies and procedures regarding individuals wounded or killed by friendly fire follow the same strict guidelines for any notification. If the Airman is deceased, the Airman's commander, or a designated representative, will lead the notification team to personally notify the next of kin as soon as possible. The next of kin are provided as much information as is known on cause and manner of death during the initial notification. If the manner of death is suspect, next of kin will be so advised. The member's commander provides a letter of circumstances to the next of kin within five days following initial notification to clarify circumstances and advise of any ongoing or pending investigations. If the commander made the notification in person to the next of kin, and there is no question regarding cause and manner of death, then a circumstance letter is optional. The commander will continue to keep the family informed about any investigations until complete. For wounded personnel, notification to the family normally occurs telephonically by the service member (if able) or the service member's commander or attending medical physician. The service member (or member's next of kin if member is incapacitated), will be kept informed about any investigation results until the case is closed.

The Air Force Office of Special Investigations initiates death investigations based on a service member's possible manner of death. In these instances, the Air Force Office of Special

Investigations initiates death investigations any time an individual's manner of death is potentially "homicide," potentially "suicide," or initially "undetermined."

Friendly Fire Incidents

The Air Force is required to follow strict protocol when a friendly fire incident occurs or when it is suspected. During a casualty notification, the member's commander or designated representative will notify the next of kin and provide the known facts at that time and will keep the next of kin informed through a letter of circumstance on any changes to what was previously communicated and upon updates of any pending investigations.

The Air Force Office of Special Investigations would initiate an investigation into such an event to determine the facts and circumstances surrounding the incident, and to assist in determining whether the actions leading to the event (fatal or not) were the result of negligence, or the result of intentional criminal conduct.

Air Force instruction provides policy regarding notification to parents or next of kin regarding the update of information and follow on investigations as they are completed, as well as new information as it is discovered, regarding the death or injury of their loved one. The service member's commander informs the next of kin, to include parents, on circumstances surrounding injury or death and any subsequent changes to previously provided information. Additionally, they are updated as more information becomes available, and information is available from any pending or ongoing investigations. The base assisting Casualty Assistance Representative assists the next of kin in obtaining a copy of completed investigations as they become available.

Open Investigations

The responsibilities associated with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations' Family Liaison Program are codified in Air Force instruction and are derived from overarching Department of Defense guidance. The Family Liaison program is designed to facilitate effective verbal and written communication with family members of any decedent whose fatality results in the opening of a death investigation. A point of contact for the decedent's family is appointed by the investigating Air Force Office of Special Investigation Detachment's leadership. Once appointed, the point of contact will contact the decedent's next of kin "after" initial notification of the fatality has been made by the servicing Casualty Affairs Officer. The Air Force Office of Special Investigations will contact the decedent's family within 72 hours after the servicing Casualty Affairs Officer makes the initial notification. The purpose of the OSI Family Liaison program is to provide the family with a point of contact during the investigation (in the event they have any questions or concerns about the death or corresponding investigation), to ensure the family fully understands the Air Force Office of Special Investigations' role in investigating the death, and to keep the family informed of the investigation (throughout the investigation, with follow-up contact being based on case development or new information). Ultimately, when the investigation is complete, the Family Liaison point of contact will contact the decedent's family and offer a telephonic briefing on the case or, if more appropriate, a face-to-face meeting to discuss the case. The Family Liaison point of contact also provides the decedent's family with a copy of the Freedom of Information Act request letter, and explains how they may obtain a copy of the completed Report of Investigation.

Caring for Airmen

Taking care of our seriously wounded, injured or ill Airmen is also a top priority. We continue to expand the Air Force Survivor Assistance and Palace HART (Helping Airmen Recover Together) Programs in an effort to provide the best possible individual service to these Airmen and their families. The heart of the Survivor Assistance Program is the Family Liaison Officer who is assigned to each patient for the duration of their need. This Family Liaison Officer is different from the OSI Family Liaison point of contact. The Family Liaison Officer serves as a single point of contact between the Airmen and the numerous helping agencies. Our Family Liaison Officers provide a critical resource to deal with the unfamiliar routine of the recovery process and prevents the Airman from being lost in the bureaucracy.

Similarly, the Palace HART Program assigns a Community Readiness Coordinator when a service member casualty notification is made. The Community Readiness Coordinator works closely with the Family Liaison Officer to ensure the combat related injured or ill service member and their family receives complete information and entitlements. Later, if the member is not returned to active duty, the Palace HART Program assists with federal employment, entitlements and benefits information, financial resources, family support, and more. The member is tracked monthly for five years after separation or retirement.

Recent Changes

In 2005 the governing directive (Air Force Instruction 36-3002, Casualty Services) was substantially revised to include more detailed procedural guidance; the previous edition was dated 1994. This included updating and clarifying roles and responsibilities, clarifying guidance on circumstance, providing instructions and format for condolence letters, and updating training responsibilities.

Conclusion

Today's Airmen are performing at the high standards that have been our hallmark for as long as there have been American Airmen. Our Airmen are fully prepared and engaged to ensure today's air, space, and cyberspace dominance. When an Airman makes the ultimate sacrifice, prompt, accurate reporting, dignified and humane notification and efficient, thorough, and compassionate assistance to the next of kin are the hallmarks of the Air Force's program. Commanders' personal attention to the Casualty Services Program ensures your Air Force remains the most respected air and space force in the world.

We appreciate your unfailing support to the men and women of our Air Force, and I look forward to your questions.