

Compassionate Guide

...Through the difficult days ahead

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



“Have a heart for highway safety”

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SC Department of Public Safety
Families of Highway Fatalities

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The Knock at the Door

If you are reading this booklet, you have probably just received the most devastating news of your life. You have lost a precious family member in a collision.

Please accept our sincere condolences to you. You are not alone. Sadly, 1,000 people die each year on South Carolina highways.

That is why the Families of Highway Fatalities' group was created. We are here to provide support for each other in the days, weeks, months and even years after our losses.

Sadly, there is a "business" side after a death that must be faced. For some, there are legal and criminal issues to address.

This book contains advice and guidance based on our experiences to help you navigate these issues. We sincerely hope it will lessen some of the stress you face right now. And remember, we are here if you need us.

—Families of Highway Fatalities

The “Survivor’s” Bill of Rights

You have just suffered one of the most traumatic shocks and losses you will likely ever face. You are a victim too.

We believe, as surviving family members, you have certain rights and expectations. You deserve to be treated with respect and dignity by law enforcement, coroners, the funeral home and family and friends.

We believe it is important for you to recognize that certain options are — and should be— available to you. This is not a time for you to feel intimidated by officials or afraid to ask for something that is important to you. If there are legal or other issues that would prohibit your request, you will be informed.

- You have the option to delay or defer certain decisions;
- You have the option to honor your loved one in the way that seems best for you, and your loved one during your funeral or memorial service.
- You have the option to request a lock of hair, handprints, clothing, etc., or make other personal requests.

- You have the option to view and/or touch your loved one. *This is a very personal decision and ultimately there is no right or wrong choice.* You may opt for a partial viewing, with much, or most of the body draped. This is usually done at the funeral home.

(Tip: Many mental health professionals recommend viewing, and those of us who decided to view the body feel that we made the right decision. You may want to bring someone with you).

- We recommend waiting at least six months or longer before you promise or give away any of your loved one's possessions.
- You have the right to delegate tasks and ask for help.
- You have the right to bring a photo of your loved one at the time of viewing, especially if you are the one who makes the identification.
- You have the option not to speak with the news media.
- *You have the right to be nurtured and supported.*

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

Immediate concerns:

- **Notify next of kin once you receive the news:**

Ensure closest next of kin is notified first — especially if it is close to news time and they may see or hear about it on the news. Notify most immediate family members first i.e. spouse or parents. It is better to notify immediate family members in person — not by phone. *It is highly recommended that you do not drive during this time. It is better for someone to take you to your other family members.*

- **Make sure young children are picked up from school/daycare:**

You will likely be in a state of shock right now. Do not forget about young children who may need to be picked up from daycare or school or other such commitments. Ensure there is someone to handle this.

- **Immediately appoint a family member or friend to take charge:**

One of the most important first steps you can take is to appoint a trusted family member or friend to “manage” your

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. You need someone who is more detached from the loss who can help make some of these critical decisions.

Please pass this book along to your appointed “family representative” as a guide to assist in the planning that will need to begin immediately.

Suggested To Do List for the Family Representative

Your most important job right now is to see that your friend or family member is cared for in a compassionate, respectful and loving manner. Do your best to insulate them from situations that will worsen their stress. There is great comfort for them in knowing someone else is “taking charge” and they are freed up to grieve.

Care of the “surviving” family:

- ___ See to the family’s immediate needs.
- ___ Ensure that young children are noti-

fied 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.

__ Nurture and nourish them.

__ 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 to make them aware of 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 is living in a separate residence, make sure the residence is secured. Take care of any animals there; take out garbage; and securely lock the premises if no one else is living there.
- __ Notify the landlord.
- __ Notify post office about mail delivery.
- __ Provide choices and have the family select a funeral home.
- __ Decide on burial or cremation.
- __ Contact the funeral home and begin to make arrangements.
- __ Consider selecting a church or chapel.

(Tip: A public (rather than private) service or visitation is recommended for the opportunity of love and support that it may provide).

- Select clergy to officiate.
- Contact newspaper to place 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 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.

***Tip: Some credit cards may carry insurance clauses that will pay off any remaining debt. Payment arrangements can be made.*

**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

You have probably already been notified by the Coroner’s Office or law enforcement of the death.

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.

- The Coroner or a Deputy Coroner will notify you of the death. They may or may not be accompanied by a law enforcement officer.
- If an individual dies at the scene, the Coroner contacts SCOPA, South Carolina Organ Procurement Agency, Inc. SCOPA then contacts the family to discuss organ and tissue donations. Time is critical.
- If an individual dies in a hospital, the respective hospital contacts SCOPA.
- Personal effects of your loved one will be released back to the family.
- Your loved one will be held only as long as necessary.
- Explanation of the process of release - 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.

***Richland County carries notification a step further by providing the service of a volunteer from its C.A.R.E. Team. They respond with compassion at the time of the death notification to offer comfort and practical assistance to the family.*

Law Enforcement:

Typically, the Highway Patrol will be the investigating entity for a highway fatality.

- The Highway Patrol may or may not accompany the coroner during notification. The Highway Patrol may make notification alone.
- What the Highway Patrol will need from you:
 - your information as the “next of kin:”
 - name, address, phone number;
 - relationship to the deceased.
- The Highway Patrol will provide you with a Financial Responsibility Form (insurance form for the vehicle involved in the collision). That form will need to be completed by the insurance agent or company that insures the vehicle.
- If the investigation is a criminal or ongoing one, be sure and ask for the lead investigating trooper’s contact information.
- If the case is a criminal or ongoing one, you may contact the investigating

trooper with questions regarding your case.

You may:

- Request the assistance of a Victim's Advocate .
- Receive emotional support: crisis counseling/intervention;
- Request assistance in applying for Victims' Compensation Fund;
- Receive Criminal Justice System and relevant case information;
- Receive referrals to agencies for counseling and other services;
- Request Court escorts;
- Request a copy of the collision report.

You should contact the Families of Highway Fatalities' coordinator if you need peer counseling or emotional support.

If you are having trouble reaching your local Highway Patrol, please refer to www.schp.org, which has contact information for each of the Highway Patrol's seven geographic Troops (or call us at 803-896-7920).

Making Funeral Arrangements

The family representative is vital to handling routine decisions and shielding the family from unwanted attention during this time. But it is so important that the immediate family members be involved in the following funeral and burial considerations. This is a time to honor and remember your loved one, and only the closest family members and friends will know how to do that in a way that is most meaningful. **The family representative should insist the family member — after some rest — is involved in these decisions.**

- Choose the funeral home (mortuary). Consider reputation, price, location and services offered. Your family pastor can advise as well.
- Make an appointment with the funeral home.
- Decide what type of services you are considering.
- Funeral homes usually provide transportation of the body, preparation and

embalming the body, filing the death certificate, 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. It is acceptable to ask questions and get services for the best price possible. The funeral home will give you an itemized list of charges.
- Ask about payment arrangements and secure agreement in writing.

*Information Needed by the
Funeral Home:*

- 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)

Contact military for a military funeral;

— Church membership;

— Clubs, organizations (or other personal information for obituary). It may also be helpful to bring a photo of your loved one, if preparation for viewing will be done;

— Order death certificates;

(recommended: at least 12 copies)

— Consider any religious or cultural rites that may be needed;

— Contact your clergy. Decide on time and place of funeral or memorial service.

Burial or Cremation Decisions

For cremation:

- Purchase an urn or cremation container from the funeral home or purchase from another source (internet).
- Purchase an object that can be used as an urn.
- Use meaningful family heirloom (for example, a vase or beautiful wooden box).
- The decision about an urn or cremation container can be deferred until a

later date.

- The cremains may be spread in a loved one's favorite place (inquire as to county health laws).
- No time constraint for engraving on headstone.

For burial:

- Select casket (open or closed). May be obtained from the funeral home or other sources. You may choose to purchase a casket from another supplier which can be shipped directly to the funeral home.
- Choices of caskets vary widely in price and can include many varieties of wood, steel (variable thicknesses), copper and bronze (most expensive). Caskets may also be rented (for viewing prior to cremation), or a less expensive casket may be included in the package price. There are multiple options in catalogues, internet etc.

(Tip: A less expensive casket can be very attractive when draped with a blanket or spray of flowers, or a loved one's favorite quilt.)

- Decide on clothing and jewelry, for your loved one. Consider dressing them in their favorite clothing/outfit.
- Decide if there are any items that you may like to have buried with them. Suggestions may include: letters from family members, pictures, mementos, etc. Before adding any item to the casket, (such a favorite piece of jewelry) consider whether the item might bring you comfort in the future if you saved it. ** Sometimes friends, especially with teen deaths, may wish to place something in the casket. The family's permission should be secured.

(Tip: Carefully think about placing jewelry with your family member for burial. You might change your mind later).

Types of Remembrance Services

Services provide an opportunity for people who knew your loved one to pay their respects and express their grief. It can help the family deal with the reality of the death, say farewell, honor their loved one, and receive support.

- A funeral service generally precedes a cemetery burial or cremation.
- A memorial service can be held any-time after the death and may or may not be connected with burial or cremation. The loved one's body is not present.
- The loved one's body is usually presented in either an open or closed casket at a funeral.
- A visitation or viewing is an opportunity to see the loved one's body before the burial or cremation. It can be public or private. It can be held prior to the funeral/memorial service or during the funeral service.
- A graveside service is conducted at the cemetery to dedicate the grave. This is usually a simple service. Most cemeteries provide a tent and chairs.
- Memorial or funeral services are usually held at a church or funeral home.

Alternative places may include: family residence, fraternal halls, Masonic Temple, golf course, park, etc. It is a good idea to obtain permission and to consider

adequate seating, parking, sound system, etc.

- Military Honors' service may be provided at the graveside for veterans that served during a time of war and were honorably discharged. Burial benefits for Veterans:

www.cem.va.gov/cem/bbene_burial.asp

For eligibility information: 1-800-827-1000.

Planning the Service

There are many details to consider. This is a time when a family can take compassionate steps that honor the wishes or legacy of their lost loved one. Sometimes because of families' deep grief and emotional state, they do not think of special considerations that would have been a meaningful keepsake for them in the years ahead. We suggest some here along with the more routine considerations:

- Select pallbearers (avoid those with heart or back problems, or make them honorary pallbearers).

- Plan for flower arrangements and delivery.
- Plan for disposition of flowers after the service (may be donated to the church, for example).
- 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 for attendees (can be purchased at the funeral home or elsewhere i.e. bookstore or religious bookstore); place at the entrance.
- Memorial cards are optional and may be purchased from the funeral home.
- Funeral coach/limousine;
- Provide directions to cemetery/escort;
- Consider type of headstone and what will be written on it. (This can be deferred until a later date).

You may wish to consider:

- Having the service(s) audio or video-taped or photographed. ** *This is*

highly recommend because you are often in a state of shock at the service and may wish to view the tape later.

- A photo and/or a collage of pictures, or a memory table. (Request pictures from friends and family members that you might not already have).
- Music, or special song (s) that your family member enjoyed. Possibilities: organ, piano, CDs, and/or singer/musician.
- Selecting scripture, meaningful readings, poems etc. Having family member read.
- Writing something from your heart or having one or more special friends or family members speak. It is helpful to give them some idea of what is expected and a time limit for their talk. Have them review their comments with close family members ahead of time.
- Memorials in lieu of, or in addition to flowers, such as donations to charity, scholarship fund, etc.
- Reserving a space for family and/or

special group or club in which your loved one may have been involved.

- Release of balloons.
- A reception after the ceremony.
- Involving surviving children or siblings. They are often the “forgotten mourners.” Younger children might place a drawing or toy in the casket, older children may want to help select poems or music or say a few words in remembrance.

After the Funeral

Once the memorial service and burial are over, there can be a tremendous sense of loneliness. You now find yourself tackling what can feel 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 where a crime was committed, there will be additional legal maneuverings and court appearances.

This is a time of confronting your grief honestly. We have found that efforts to

overmedicate yourself during this time will only delay the grieving process.

Don't be surprised if calls, visits and the close attention you have had since the death begin falling away. This is normal. While you may not feel like returning to your old life, others must, and that's OK. Don't be offended. Continue to call on your friends as needed, but use this time to "experience" the grieving process.

Steps we found helpful:

- Do not hesitate to seek counseling. Ask trusted friends, clergy or other family members for recommendations.
- Use prescription medication for sleep or anxiety ONLY as needed or as recommended by your doctor.
- Grief is exhausting. You will likely feel very tired or alternate between bursts of energy and complete lethargy. Expect this.
- Sleep and rest as needed but also make sure you are getting plenty of fresh air. Take your friends up on offers to get out of the house.

Pitfalls to avoid:

During this time, you may be tempted to make major, life-altering decisions. You may feel the need to withdraw from family members or friends.

You may wish to sell your home because the memories of your loved one are too strong there. PLEASE TRY TO WAIT. We recommend waiting at least one year before making major decisions. Your only job right now should be to grieve with the help and support of your friends and family.

What to expect:

In the coming year to five years, you will experience a wide range of emotions. You may think you are on the path to wellness and healing, and then an anniversary rolls around. A smell may set off a torrent of tears. This is normal. Take time to work through each stage. Don't rush it. And don't let others tell you "it's time to move on."

Our Families of Highway Fatalities' members have found the following books, reading materials and web sites helpful.

We are passing these along to you in hopes that some of these suggestions may help you on your road to healing.

Books and web sites FHF members found helpful:

Websites:

<http://www.centeringcorp.com/catalog/index.php>

<http://www.griefhelp.org/uploads/Griefhelp%20Book0306open.pdf>

<http://www.madd.org/home>

<http://www.griefnet.org>

http://www.aarp.org/families/grief_loss/

<http://www.widownet.org>

<http://www.journeyofhearts.org/>

<http://www.grieflossrecovery.com/grief>

<http://www.tlcinstitute.org>

<http://www.compassionbooks.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;

** 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 Raymond 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.

Some Final 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 begin to laugh again in time and enjoy life.

We have trained peer counselors as part of our group. 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.

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