

Death of an Employee

Resource Guide for Managers

The death of an employee is a traumatic event that may greatly affect the workplace. Whether the death arose from prolonged illness or a sudden event, some employees will experience feelings of grief and loss. On a practical level, numerous issues must be addressed, including informing the staff, covering the employee's work, and finalizing compensation and benefit payments to the estate and beneficiaries.

If the death occurs at work, call 911. Do not move the body. You must also report the death immediately to UAMS Occupational Health and Safety, 686-5536.

Contact the family

When an employee dies at work, you will need to deal with the next of kin very sensitively. A manager who knew the employee may be the most appropriate person to break the news, or sometimes a colleague who knows the family well may volunteer. You or a spokesperson may wish to meet the family at the hospital or mortuary. Not sure who the emergency contact is? Look in SAP under infotype 0006 Addresses, or contact Human Resources at 686-5650.

If the employee passed away in the hospital or other location away from work, someone from the family will likely contact you. Here are some things to cover in that conversation:

- Extend condolences.
- Ask for as much information as the family is comfortable giving.
- Inquire about service arrangements or ask for the name of a contact person who can provide funeral details when known.
- Ask if work colleagues may attend the service; the family might want only a small group of immediate relatives to participate.
- Determine the family's wishes regarding remembrance (e.g. flowers, charitable contributions) and where sympathy cards should be sent.
- Make sure the family knows whom to contact for benefits-related issues, or offer to be the go-between yourself. Provide family with the phone number for Human Resources, 686-5650. Let them know that we would be happy to talk to or meet with them at their convenience to discuss benefit matters. While some families may want to delay this discussion until after the funeral, others may find this information useful prior to making arrangements and covering final expenses.
- You may let them know that we will need a copy of the death certificate in order to file the life insurance claim, and that those benefits can be assigned to cover all or a part of funeral costs.
- At the appropriate time, inform the next of kin about payment of remaining wages, including lump sum payment of vacation balance.

- Arrange for packing and delivery of personal belongings (ask family how they want this handled). Offer to do it for them if preferred. A close colleague or supervisor is the best choice if family prefers not to be involved. Offer to retrieve work-related items from the deceased's home, such as a company computer, cell phone, credit card, or vehicle.

Send a gift, such as flowers or a gift basket, and card to the family as a tangible way to offer UAMS's condolences. Let employees contribute to the purchase.

Notify your employees

There is no way to anticipate how you will learn of the death of one of your employees. You may be the first to know from the family, or another employee may alert you. React quickly by notifying immediate staff and close work friends directly – and privately – before making a general announcement. Keep things simple, sharing whatever details the family is comfortable with you sharing (keep HIPAA in mind). Remember to contact staff who may be away or on leave.

You might want to add a few words about your favorite memory of the person or how that person had an impact on you. You might also want to prepare a formal statement in the event that the employee was well known professionally.

Communicate the family's wishes in regards to flowers or donations in lieu of flowers.

Designate an internal contact person for employees who have any questions or concerns, to prevent employees from trying to contact the family directly.

Remind employees that the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has counselors available to talk them through the stress and grief they might experience. The number is 686-2588 or 800-542-6021. The EAP is also available to work groups that may have been directly affected by the employee's death. Contact the EAP to discuss the needs of the work group to determine the type of debriefing or intervention available.

Operate an open-door policy to those coworkers who are suffering from emotional distress.

Address time-off for those planning to attend services. Consider impact on business, but also recognize that many employees may wish to attend the service.

Engage the employee's closest colleagues in planning a memorial function to honor their friend. Allow them to coordinate other commemorations, like a photo board, a charity fundraiser, a plaque, a memorial/scholarship fund, or a workplace event such as a luncheon or reception.

Notify others, process termination

Contact Human Resources at 686-5650 to report of the employee's death. This helps us anticipate the family's call and prepare information for them.

Contact the UAMS Office of Communications and Marketing at 686-8990 if you anticipate any possible contact with the media.

Follow normal termination processing:

- Key termination into SAP. The employee's date of death is their last day to be an employee. The following day begins their terminated status.
- Complete the clearance process on behalf of the employee so that all equipment, keys and ID badge are returned and security issues are addressed.

Getting back to work

In addition to sharing the news of the person's passing with your staff, you also need to discuss how to continue progress on the person's work.

Find out the open items, major issues, and immediate tasks that were associated with the person. Once you have this information, you will need to meet with your staff and figure out how to distribute the person's work. You will also need to discover as much information about any future appointments or commitments.

Make arrangements to cover the deceased employee's work. In the short term you could reallocate work to existing staff or hire a temp. You can then begin your recruitment process to find a replacement.

It is best not to make any abrupt moves in regard to space changes. People need time to grieve the loss of their coworkers before seeing his or her workstation dismantled.

The new, replacement employee needs to be prepared for possible negative comparisons with the deceased employee. If the deceased was particularly well-liked, the transition will be even more difficult. It is advisable to give staff notice of the new employee's start date, relevant work background and to prepare them for the change. It is a normal part of accepting a loss to welcome someone new.

As the manager, expect the death of an employee to result in lower productivity and motivation for a brief time. The debriefing held soon after the announcement will ease the impact of loss, but it cannot be avoided entirely. Eventually the work unit will return to its normal level of functioning.

Remember the first few anniversaries quietly, perhaps with a moment of silence.

What we'll do in Human Resources

While each situation is unique, here are the general steps our office will take.

- Notify Payroll immediately, who will lock the employee's payroll record. Any pay due to the deceased employee will be paid to their beneficiary upon their completion of a W-9 form. Federal and state taxes will not be deducted from this payment. Social Security and Medicare taxes will be deducted if the beneficiary's check is issued in the same year as the employee's death. A 1099 will be issued to the beneficiary for the amount paid.
- Meet with beneficiaries in person or by phone, their preference, to discuss benefits.
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- Process the life insurance claim. A copy of the death certificate is all that is needed from the family. Usually the certificate is available one to two weeks after the death.
- Discuss assignment options with the family. If funds are not available to pay the funeral home, the beneficiary can "assign" a portion of the life insurance benefits to the funeral home.
- Extend continuation of medical, dental and vision insurance (also UA tuition discount) to the surviving spouse and dependent children.
- Determine balance of health care flexible spending account and notify family of options.
- Notify family of retirement plan options, including the UA Retirement Plan (TIAA and/or Fidelity) and Social Security.
- Begin COBRA benefit notification process.
- Notify group disability insurance or workers' compensation providers to halt payments (if applicable).
- Advise family of beneficiary support services.

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