



A GUIDE FOR  
*Grieving*  
*Families*



**INFORMATION FOR SURVIVORS OF FATAL CRASH VICTIMS**





## Our Deepest Condolences

If you are reading this, you have been given some devastating news about the unexpected death of a family member. On behalf of the Missouri State Highway Patrol, we are very sorry for the loss of your loved one. Each and every trooper has an interest in preserving lives on our roadways and waterways, and we regret that in this instance a life was lost. Our thoughts and prayers go out to you and your family during this difficult time.

We realize the grieving process continues long after the death. This booklet was prepared to assist you and your family in understanding and getting through these difficult times. Troopers, medical examiners, victims' families, victim advocates, and many others have provided input to make this publication as helpful as possible. It will provide answers to commonly asked questions and give you guidance about the grieving process, including where to turn for help.

This booklet also provides necessary case information and contact information for the law enforcement officials involved in your case. We understand that obtaining answers is an important part of the grieving process. As you have questions, we welcome you to call the Highway Patrol to seek answers or to stay informed as your case progresses.

Again, please accept our sincerest condolences on the tragic loss of your loved one.

*Respectfully,*

*The men and women of your Missouri State Highway Patrol*



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## *What Do I Do Now?*

These are some of the immediate concerns you'll need to address after the unexpected death of your loved one.

### **Notifying Other Family Members**

Understand that certain laws dictate who troopers notify first. You may experience frustration regarding who was initially notified. Please understand the Highway Patrol has parameters to work within and we do our best to provide timely notification.

Once you have been notified, consider what other immediate family members need to be contacted. Notifying the deceased's spouse, children, and parents is typically high priority. If possible, notify these immediate family members first.

Consider how the person you are notifying will react to the news. It may be more appropriate to notify them in person, rather than by phone. If traveling to another location for notification, consider having someone drive you.

When notifying children, consider their age. Age-appropriate information is best when delivering difficult news.

Do not make a notification alone. The Highway patrol urges you to seek support from others as you notify family members and friends about what has happened. Many survivors find it useful to reach out to clergy, friends, and neighbors to notify other family members.

### **Organ and/or Tissue Donation**

Many people express their desire to be an organ donor. Carrying out their wishes is possible only if you act expeditiously as recovering organs is a time-sensitive process. One's wish of being an organ donor may be printed on their driver's license or documented in a will. Their wish to do so may only have been expressed verbally, which is acceptable, also. It is up to your family to ensure organ and/or tissue donation wishes are fulfilled. Questions should be directed toward the medical examiner or medical personnel handling your case.

### **Appoint a Family Representative to Take Charge**

Sometimes families find it useful to have someone who is more detached from the situation take charge of certain responsibilities. This will give families time to grieve and address other important concerns. Consider having a family representative ensure care of the surviving family's needs, manage household maintenance, cover immediate legal issues/paperwork, and locate important legal documents. Share this booklet with your representative, or ask for a duplicate copy. Family representatives can screen phone calls to reduce the stress placed upon survivors.

## Caring For Children & Pets

While it seems obvious, do not forget to care for your children and the children of your loved one. Many survivors report having lapses in memory or judgment when it comes to childcare, children in school, children needing rides, pets at home, etc. This is part of the shock and grieving process, but something of which you need remain aware. In the days after the crash, if you feel overwhelmed with tasks, depend on reliable friends and family members to assist with taking care of children and pets.

## Manage Household Maintenance

Keep track and take care of necessary household tasks. Ask for help with basic tasks, such as cleaning, mowing, shoveling snow, meal preparation, pet care, etc. If your loved one lived alone, make sure the house is secured. If they lived in an apartment, remember to contact any roommates and the landlord to make them aware of the situation.

## Whom To Contact

Notifications that might need to be made after an unexpected death:

- Church (including pastor/clergy)
- Schools
- Employers
- Insurance companies
- Social Security Administration
- Military or Veteran's Administration
- Attorney (estate or other)
- Banks
- Retirement funds
- Credit card companies

## Secure Important Paperwork

Locate documents, such as automobile insurance papers, automobile titles, birth certificate, citizenship papers, cemetery deed, disability claims, driver's license or state identification, financial power of attorney, health care directive, living will, marriage license, social security card, and veteran's discharge papers. (Some of these items may not be applicable to your situation.) In our age of technology, it may be necessary to have passwords and user ids for access to online accounts.

## Vehicle/Vessel Location

Information regarding where the vehicle/vessel was towed should be noted on the crash report. Contact the tow company to ask about removing personal belongings. Consider asking the tow company to remove property from the vehicle/vessel if you do not want to see it. If there is a hold on the vehicle/vessel, there may be a delay in removing belongings, but the Highway Patrol can assist you. Viewing the vehicle/vessel may include seeing blood or body tissue. Ask about the condition of the vehicle/vessel before retrieving belongings.



## *The Grieving Process*

Sadly, hundreds of people are killed on Missouri's roadways/waterways each year. You have been given devastating news and are most likely in a state of shock while trying to process this harsh reality. As a survivor, it is important to remember you are not alone.

## Common Feelings

Many survivors report that when they first hear the news they are "in a fog." Some say it does not feel real, and as things sink in, they feel helpless. Many survivors report a feeling of being lost and not knowing what to do next. Even daily tasks, such as eating meals, can be forgotten.

Expect to experience a wide range of emotions for years -- this is normal. You may feel you are doing great and then a song, television show, photo, or smell reminds you of your loved one and brings you great sorrow. Grief is a natural response to a life-changing loss. It is not a sign of weakness. The ultimate goal of the grief process is to gain acceptance of the changes that have occurred as a result of the loss. The best way to cope with loss is to recognize it, understand that the feelings you experience are normal, and to reach out for support during the grieving process. Survivors often feel better when they talk about their loved one.

### ***Stages of the grieving process include:***

- Denial
- Disbelief
- Numbness
- Shock
- Anger and guilt
- Blame (sometimes misdirected)
- Sadness and despair
- Loneliness
- Tearfulness
- Depression
- Reminders that bring new waves of grief
- Acceptance and hope
- Adjustment to change
- Expectation of positive future
- Aftermath
- The intensity of grief decreases

Each person's grief is unique. Thus, you may experience one of these stages for a longer or shorter period of time than someone else who has experienced a similar loss.

## **Health Tips**

- Surround yourself with friends and family who love and support you. Avoid isolating yourself.
- If you follow a religious faith, this can be a time for prayer and quiet meditation. Seek out your faith or spiritual advisors.
- Do not forget to eat healthy meals; it is important to maintain your physical health during the grieving process. Avoid alcohol and other mind-altering drugs. Use prescription medications for sleep or anxiety only as recommended by your doctor.
- Sleep and rest as needed, but get involved with an activity, such as exercise or simply leaving the house for short periods of time.
- Grieve at your own pace. Don't judge or measure your reactions by those of others.
- Give yourself permission to take periodic breaks from the grieving process. Grief is exhausting. Expect fatigue and lethargy at times.
- Learn to be sensitive and flexible with your new needs and lifestyle.

Avoid making major life-changing decisions. You may feel the need to sell your home or completely alter your life. Consult professionals and do not be in a rush to make major decisions about your future.

## **Seek Help**

Most survivors seek some type of help in dealing with this crisis. This help may come from clergy, friends, neighbors, professionals, relatives, or support groups. It is important to understand that even if you feel you are an independent



person that can handle any situation, there may be a time where you can still draw help from others. Many survivors feel it eases the situation.

## Resources For Support

There are several resources listed in this booklet, all of which provide support and assistance to the families of fatal crash victims. Additionally, there are groups that provide a platform to contribute to traffic fatality prevention. Many people find purpose in becoming involved in the traffic safety cause.

## Crime Victims' Compensation Fund

If your loved one was the victim of a crime, such as a criminal vehicular/vessel incident, DWI, BWI, or felony hit and run, contact the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund at 800-347-6881. Funds may be available for medical or funeral costs, loss of support, lost wages, and counseling.



Most fatal traffic/boating crashes are investigated and reconstructed to determine why the crash occurred. Reconstruction is a detailed process, which may include the analysis of physical evidence, interviewing witnesses, forensic testing, toxicology results, scale diagram creation, and report writing. This process takes time. Different crashes bring about varying degrees of investigation and reconstruction. A copy of the entire investigation or pieces of the investigation (including the crash report) can be requested through the Highway Patrol's Patrol Records Division at 573-526-6113 for a small fee. If you have questions about the investigation and reconstruction process, contact the Highway Patrol trooper or investigator listed on the crash report or in this booklet.

The Highway Patrol submits serious injury and fatal crash cases to the appropriate prosecutor for a case review. While there are times where this might not occur, the vast majority of cases are reviewed by the appropriate county prosecuting attorney. Stay in contact with the Highway Patrol or the prosecuting attorney's office to remain advised of the progress of the case.

Expect the criminal justice process to move slowly if your case involves a criminal investigation. Criminal cases can be complex. Many survivors feel frustrated with law enforcement and the criminal justice system because cases seem to take a long time to adjudicate. Contacting a victim advocate through the appropriate channels can be helpful as you navigate the criminal court system.

Many cases also end up in civil court. The civil and criminal processes are significantly different. The Highway Patrol is responsible for investigating criminal cases, but does not handle civil matters. If you have interest in pursuing a person, business, or organization civilly, consult with an attorney specializing in that practice.

## *Understanding The Autopsy Process*

Autopsies may occur following a death in a traffic/boating crash. Understand that if you elect to view your loved one's body, it may not be immediate. Once a victim is pronounced deceased, the coroner has the authority to determine whether or not an autopsy is necessary. If an autopsy is performed, the deceased person will most likely be transported to a medical examiner's office, which may be a long distance from the crash location. Each county has its own set of rules determining when an autopsy is performed. You will be notified if one will be done. The trooper who made the death notification, the hospital where your loved one died, or the mortician will be able to give you the phone number of the coroner or medical examiner.

Please understand that an autopsy is often critical to an investigation. Often an autopsy helps crash investigators determine what happened in an incident. If an autopsy was performed, autopsy results are available to the personal representative or administrator of the estate of the deceased, the surviving spouse, and any surviving child, parent, brother, or sister of the deceased. A request must be made to the medical examiner or coroner who performed the autopsy and cannot be disseminated by the Highway Patrol. Often a body can be viewed prior to an autopsy. However, if the deceased person's body is being analyzed for forensic purposes, your family may not be allowed to see the body until the autopsy is complete. Once the autopsy is complete, the body is released to a funeral home where it can be viewed.

If an autopsy is performed, or if the deceased person is an organ/tissue donor, neither interferes with having an open casket funeral. The coroner will assist you with any questions about the autopsy process.





## *Out-Of-State*

*If your family member died in a traffic crash out-of-state, you will follow the same procedures as if they died locally:*

1. Make sure you know where your loved one has been taken:  
What hospital? What morgue?
2. Call a mortuary, either in your area or in the town where your loved one died.
3. Call the hospital or morgue in the city where they died to release the body.



## *Rights Of The Survivors*

Surviving family members and victims have certain rights and expectations of which they should be aware. Most importantly, you have the right to be treated with respect by officials.

- You have the right to delay certain decisions.
- You have the right to honor your loved one in a way fit for your family.
- You may request a lock of hair, handprints, or clothing.

You have the option to view your loved one prior to burial or cremation. Many survivors claim it is helpful to see the deceased. You should ask about the condition of your loved one prior to viewing.

You have the right to speak or decline to speak with the news media. The media may attempt to contact you about the crash. Sometimes it is helpful to have a family member or representative available to speak to the media. If you have questions about what is being reported in the media, contact the public information officer at the troop headquarters located in the area where the crash occurred.

If your loved one was a victim of a crime, other resources are made available to you. Contact the Highway Patrol's crime victim advocate by calling the Filling a V.O.I.D. hotline at 1-888-773-1800.

In criminal cases, many other rights apply. Please ask the assigned Highway Patrol trooper or investigator or prosecuting attorney for further information, or refer to the Missouri statute 595.200 RSMO.



## *What Should I Expect From Officials?*

You will find the officials that assist you during this difficult time are experienced and professional.

### **Expect:**

- Compassion from troopers. Remember that Highway Patrol members have a passion for protecting lives on our roadways and waterways. State troopers are saddened when someone is killed. When the outcome of a crash is tragic, the Highway Patrol strives to provide you with the best possible service.
- The option to meet with the troopers and investigators to discuss the outcome of your case once the investigation is complete.
- A thorough and complete investigation. Crash investigations can be quite complex. Due to the complexity of some crashes, several months may pass before all reports are completed.
- Timely answers to your questions from the Highway Patrol. While varying work schedules and case loads sometimes will prevent the immediate return of messages, your case is a priority for us.
- Compassion and information from the coroner or medical examiner. Their job not only consists of dealing with the deceased person, but guiding the family in the process.
- Compassion and guidance from the funeral home. Remember, it is the family's option to select a funeral home to handle the funeral planning process.



## *Funeral Information*

You will be provided with information regarding the location of your loved one. Your loved one's body is transported at the direction of the coroner who was on scene at the crash. Contact the coroner to determine where the body has been sent and when viewing arrangements can be made.

If an autopsy was performed by the medical examiner, the body has been sent to their office somewhere in the state. If an autopsy was not performed, the body likely was moved to a funeral home near the scene of the crash. In either

case, you have the right to choose the funeral home to provide service to your family. The coroner or medical examiner can help guide you toward finding a funeral home that best suits your needs. The funeral home you select will be responsible for transporting the body, embalming the body, cremation services, and guiding you through the entire funeral and/or burial process.

The funeral home will assist you with writing an obituary and contacting newspapers for publication. Consider bringing a photo of your loved one to the funeral home for obituary purposes. Funeral homes have contact information for florists if your family desires flower arrangements at the funeral.

*The funeral home may request this information:*

- Full name and date of birth of deceased
- Social Security number
- Address and phone number
- Date and place of birth
- Date and place of death
- Marital status
- Education
- Occupation
- Father's name
- Mother's name
- Names of immediate family members

Check with the auto/boat insurance company to determine if the policy covers any costs for funeral services. If your loved one was the victim of a crime, such as vehicular assault, DWI, BWI, or felony hit and run, contact the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund at 800-347-6881. Funds may be available for medical and funeral costs.



Once the remembrance services are finished, you may experience an incredible state of loneliness. This is a normal feeling. Many survivors remain consumed with responsibilities between the death and funeral service, only to be confronted with the reality of the death and the grieving process after the funeral has ended. If your loved one was the victim of a crime, be prepared for a lengthy criminal justice process.



## Resources

At times, you may feel overwhelmed. Tackling legal paperwork and procedural issues can be complicated by delays. There are many groups available for advice, legal help, and support. Many survivors find healing through volunteering and getting involved. These resources will help you locate support or answer questions.

### **Missouri State Highway Patrol**

General Headquarters

1510 Elm Street

P.O. Box 568

Jefferson City, MO 65102-0568

Phone: 573-751-3313

*Email:* [mshppied@mshp.dps.mo.gov](mailto:mshppied@mshp.dps.mo.gov)    *Internet:* [statepatrol.dps.mo.gov](http://statepatrol.dps.mo.gov)  
(includes listing for all troop headquarters)

### **Filling a V.O.I.D. Program (Victims of Impaired Drivers)**

(Victim Advocate Services)

Missouri State Highway Patrol

888-773-1800

### **Missouri Department Of Public Safety**

1101 Riverside Drive

Lewis and Clark Building, 4th Floor West

P.O. Box 749

Jefferson City, MO 65102

Phone: (573) 751-4905

*Internet:* [www.dps.mo.gov/dir/](http://www.dps.mo.gov/dir/)

### **Crime Victims' Compensation (CVC)**

Missouri Department of Public Safety

Phone: 800-347-6881

*Internet:* [www.dps.mo.gov/dir/programs/cvc](http://www.dps.mo.gov/dir/programs/cvc)

### **Missouri Department of Transportation**

Highway Safety and Traffic Division

Missouri Coalition For Roadway Safety

P.O. Box 270

Jefferson City, MO 65102

Phone: 800-800-2358 or 573-751-4161

*Email:* [savemolives@modot.mo.gov](mailto:savemolives@modot.mo.gov)

*Internet:* [www.savemolives.com/mcrs](http://www.savemolives.com/mcrs)

**Mothers Against Drunk Driving**

(Central Office -- Missouri)  
1757 Woodcliff Drive  
Jefferson City, MO 65109  
Phone: 573-636-2460  
Victims' Assistance: 877-MADD-HELP  
*Internet:* www.madd.org

**NOVA (National Organization for Victim Assistance)**

510 King Street, Suite 220  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
Phone: 800-879-6682 (NOVA)  
*Internet:* www.trynova.org



[www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/grief-and-loss](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/grief-and-loss)

[www.centering.org](http://www.centering.org)

[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

[www.journeyofhearts.org](http://www.journeyofhearts.org)

[www.widownet.org](http://www.widownet.org)





## *Helpful 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

**"Finding Hope When a Child Dies: What Other Cultures Can Teach Us"**

by Sukie Miller with Doris Ober

**"Finding Your Way After Your Spouse Dies"**

by Marta Felber

**"First You Die: Learn to Live After the Death of Your Child"**

by Marie Levine

**"Good Grief: A Novel"**

by Lolly Winston

**"Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love: Daily Meditations to Help You Through the Grieving Process"** by Raymond R. Mitsch and Lynn Brookside

**"Healing a Spouse's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Husband or Wife Dies"**

by Alan D. Wolfelt

**"No Time for Goodbyes: Coping With Sorrow, Anger, Injustice After a Tragic Death"**

by Janice Harris Lord

**"On Grief & Grieving: Finding The Meaning Of Grief Through The Five States Of Loss"**

by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

**"The Mourning Handbook: The Most Comprehensive Resource Offering Practical and Compassionate Advice on Coping With All Aspects of Death and Dying"** by Helen Fitzgerald

**"Through a Season of Grief: Devotions for Your Journey From Mourning to Joy"**

by Bill Dunn

**"What to Do When The Police Leave: A Guide to the First Days of Traumatic Loss"** by Bill Jenkins





## Crash Information

Report/Case/Incident #: \_\_\_\_\_ Highway Patrol Troop: \_\_\_\_\_

Date & Time of Crash: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Crash: \_\_\_\_\_

Trooper Investigating Crash: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Major Crash Investigation Unit Contact (*if applicable*): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Trooper Notifying Family: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Coroner: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Deceased: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Vehicle/Vessel: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Is there a police hold on vehicle/vessel? Yes  No

Other information: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_





## CRIME VICTIM HOTLINE

Filling a V.O.I.D. Program (Victims of Impaired Drivers)

Victim Advocate Services

1-888-773-1800

## EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

1-800-525-5555

or Cellular \*55

## ROAD CONDITIONS

1-888-275-6636



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[YouTube](https://www.youtube.com)



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