



Preparing Your Agency to Handle an Officer's Death

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Nick B.: Hello, I'm Nick Breul, senior project manager with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. Thank you for joining me for this SAFLEO Sessions podcast. I'm joined today by retired officer Dan Foley of the Wyandotte, Michigan, Police Department. Dan spent 27 years with that agency, and in the course of his time there, he became the commander of their honor guard unit. Dan has developed an expertise in the training of honor guard units and in providing ceremonial guidance to hundreds of law enforcement agencies across the country. Dan has also been instrumental in coordinating National Police Week honor guard activities here in DC, and we're just really thankful to have you here today and to learn from your experiences and to have you share your thoughts with us on this important topic. We're here today to talk about the importance of being prepared. Being prepared for the worst of all the events—a line-of-duty death or an officer suicide. Dan, I want to welcome you and, again, thank you for joining us.

Dan F.: Nick, it's good to hear from you. Thank you so much for having me on.

Nick B.: Sure. So as I said, today we want to talk about the importance of being prepared, and in your experience as an officer who has helped navigate the difficult position of these ceremonial services, funerals for line-of-duty deaths as well as law enforcement suicides, can you walk us through just how important it is to be prepared and what happens when you're not?

Dan F.: Well, it seems like law enforcement agencies are prepared for just about everything. We've taken into consideration contingencies for almost everything we can think of, and for some reason, and I don't know why, it doesn't seem to be that we're very well prepared to handle a funeral. And I just don't know why. I don't know how many departments that I speak to—it seems like the mantra is, "Plan for the worst and hope for the best," or that you never have to use it. Well, if we can plan for the worst and hope for the best, why isn't that we can't do the same when we have an officer that sadly dies in the line of duty or dies by suicide? And if you don't plan for something like this, the problems that you can incur once the actual death occurs, it's just monumental.

And it just seems to compound upon itself, and you don't quite understand how serious it can become until you are neck deep into the event itself. And now you're scrambling to understand what should have been placed into a plan or an operating procedure or an SOP many, many years, probably prior, months prior. I know of departments that literally had put their SOP together just months before and then sadly experienced a line-of-duty death, and they were so grateful that they put something together, to have a working understanding of it instead of just winging it. Because again, the things that can happen professionally, along with the lines of protocol within the department and with the family, can be so heartbreaking, so to speak. It's just unbelievable. So, you really do need to have a working operation plan in order.

Nick B.: So it's—it's really important to sort of get ahead of it and have things already set in place so you can go to those plans and having already thought the matter through to some degree. Do you have any stories of or experiences that you had where a

police officer's funeral was problematic or that you saw the fallout from that lack of preparation?

Dan F.:

Oh yeah, absolutely. Behind the scenes, it's truly organized chaos at its very best. And usually, what we hope, as with anything else, is that we're projecting to the public and to the family this incredible realm of professionalism and well-organized, well-choreographed, well-orchestrated service that the family can be proud of. You know, even just for a few minutes, we can take them out of their grief and make them proud of what they're seeing, to understand that the law enforcement, their family, the blue family, is behind them. But behind the scenes, again, it's anything but, usually. It can go anything from the assigned family liaison thinking that they know what may or may be best and making a suggestion to the next of kin in a very vulnerable state of mind—what they would like to see or what ought to be seen.

And once that seed is planted into their head at that time, again, because they're so vulnerable after a death has taken place, once that happens, it's almost hard to get them back into focus. Some of the requests that we've had have been so outlandish simply because they don't understand, they don't know protocol. And again, you don't know why people do that. A lot of it is coming from just simply inexperience. Some of it could be coming with well-meaning intentions, good of heart. But the reality is, behind the scenes, that once you make that suggestion, if it's something that we can't accomplish or provide, or if it doesn't fall within the realm of a normal protocol standard, it's hard to explain that to the family that you simply can't do that.

Or something along the lines of an administrator who simply by their position as being the administrator within the agency, they may or may not have had any experience in ceremonial protocol, and I mean the top end formalities. However, because they are the chief or the sheriff or whatever agency's administrator, would have the director of public safety, so on and so forth, they feel that they know best. And once that happens, simply by default because they're the person in charge of the affected agency, we've had situations in the past where that can make planning a service very, very difficult. And you try to explain to them how this has to work and how it has to come off, and for a number of reasons, whether it's simply their

position, their attitude, their ego, their belief that they know what's going on, or again, they are affected as well as everybody else—they're a coworker survivor, so to speak—it can really make for a difficult situation to work with them.

Nick B.: So, if it's not handled properly right out of the gate with making sure the family knows what to expect and taking into account their feelings, I imagine there's been some times when some of these things that haven't gone off correctly have left families bewildered, or even the rank and file—perhaps angry at how a particular service for an officer was handled.

Dan F.: Absolutely. You know, we always have a saying that we serve at the pleasure and the discretion of the family. It's not to infer that doing a funeral is pleasurable. That's not it. But everything that happens during a law enforcement funeral happens with the blessings and the approval of the family. We do absolutely nothing without their involvement, without their understanding, and without their input. Now, what makes it difficult is sometimes the next of kin, their mental state at the time of the planning may be very, very difficult to deal with—simply the shock of what has taken place. I've seen it where sometimes the next of kin is incredibly tuned in, almost to the point where they haven't been affected by the death. And you don't know if it's the shock and it's just how they deal with it, but they've been very dialed in and very part of planning the funeral. And it's incredible to watch.

I've seen other sides of it where the next of kin has simply been so out of touch with anything that has been going on, it's very difficult to work with them. So, you have to go to the next person within the family who's capable of making common sense to judgements and communication and approval, so that we can go ahead and plan the funeral. And again, anything that we do comes with the approval and the blessing of the family.

Nick B.: So, Dan, I imagine it can be particularly challenging when dealing with a law enforcement suicide. Not that a line-of-duty death isn't challenging enough, but I imagine that there's some difficulties on top of that that you experience when dealing with a law enforcement suicide. So, I wonder if you could just help us with some of the best practices or some of the sound manners in which you think agencies should prepare for this. And I want the listeners to understand that this is a very difficult topic. And, of

course, I work for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, who's responsible for putting names of slain officers on the Wall—line-of-duty deaths.

So, we deal with how we honor those people all the time. So, I don't want the audience to think that you and I are being particularly flippant about this topic, but we think it's an important topic to discuss. But if you could, Dan, just share with us what you have found to be sound steps to take and how to get an agency ready—and I don't want to say for the inevitable, but for one of the worst things that can happen.

Dan F.:

You know, Nick, nobody ever wants to have their agency or assist an agency with a line-of-duty death funeral. I mean, it's absolutely horrible when we get our call that, that our State Memorial Team has to respond somewhere here in the state of Michigan and assist an agency who has sadly lost an officer in the line of duty. But for a manner of thinking, if I could, when a line-of-duty death takes place because there's an investigation process—and generally it's pretty straightforward, the cause of death—obviously, in order to get PSOBs and criteria for admission to the Wall there in Washington, there has to be certain levels of criteria that are met, that are approved, before you can even proceed. On a ceremonial aspect, we only have a short period of time to make sure that we're doing the right thing and providing a hero's funeral, so to speak. And usually, again—during a line-of-duty death, it's usually pretty straightforward.

With a suicide, it's anything but. It brings in with it a quagmire, just a nightmare of scenarios and circumstances that will literally feed upon itself and create a very, very dark working environment simply by the nature of what has taken place, meaning somebody has taken their life by suicide. And it can be anything from simply ignorance—somebody doesn't understand what is currently happening. It can be a religious aspect—somebody's personal religious beliefs will conflict with what they should or should not do. It can be politics—somebody can be unfortunately involved, such as the upper administration or being influenced by the city that they work for, that they shouldn't be doing anything because of this. It can simply be egos and attitudes. That's another thing to worry about, and it compounds upon itself.

But there are a number of things that you really do need look at this. You know, another bad thing could be the person that sadly has died by suicide may have been involved in something that the department or a department was investigating, which now a criminal element could possibly become involved, which would then prohibit you, which should prohibit you from proceeding any further, because its brought disgrace upon our profession, upon the department. And it creates a complexity that you simply cannot go out and unfortunately honor that person. I'm not saying you shouldn't be standing by the family. You do what you can to stay by our blue family and support them. But there comes a point in time where you, unfortunately, simply can't proceed further.

But if you can, there's a number of ways that I always like to look at it and I always like to approach it. I've always got a number of questions that whenever I'm called, that I will submit to an administrator, and they're hard questions. They're very difficult questions that nobody should ever have to ask. I always hate asking them, but before I can advise them further and give them the honest answer that they're looking for, I have these questions that I have to submit to them. The first one for me, it's going to be, it's very simple, "Was the deceased officer a good officer? Were they a good employee?" The second one is going to be, "Did the deceased meet and/or exceed any criteria set forth by the department when he or she was hired?" Simply, again, you have to isolate this. You have to make sure that the person you're looking at was a good employee. "Did they do what you asked of them while they were employed with your department?" It's a simple question.

The third question for me is going to be, "Was the deceased presently or previously involved in any crime or criminal investigation that would've brought disgrace upon our profession, that agency, or the city?" It's a big question. You have to really think about this. Again, we have a code of ethics, a code of conduct that law enforcement works by. And if somebody, sadly, has stepped over those lines, there does come a point in time that, as the administrator for that agency, you're going to have to recognize this. And there could be an investigation going on that simply prohibits you, again, from pushing on and going further.

The fourth question for me is going to be, "When committing the act, when this person has decided to take their life by suicide, did the deceased inflict any harm upon anyone else?" And I have in parentheses usually in this question, "Other than him or herself and or their family due to the completion of the act of suicide." Meaning, "So did the deceased commit any crime when planning or executing this? Did they, let's say, take their vehicle and drive it into a building or into a crowd of people or something along those lines?" Again, suicide just simply by its history and its nature, is a violent act. And it doesn't tend to be that when somebody does die by suicide—it seems to be that they go out in a very, very violent manner. It not so simple as just laying down in bed and going to sleep. A lot of times, it's more complex than that. So, you have to look, "Did they hurt anybody by doing this?"

The next question will be is, "When completing the act, did the deceased place any first responders or assisting entities in any undue harm or risk in order to investigate this incident?" So, did the deceased utilize any agency or city resources when they decided to take their life by suicide that places quite an undue burden upon any responding agency? It could be your own agency. It could somebody, let's say if they decided to drive their vehicle into a river, there has to be search and rescue. There has to be recovery. There's EPA involved in recovering the vehicle because fuel is involved. You place divers at risk going in and securing the scene. It becomes very, very costly. It becomes very, very dangerous to other people. And I also have another sub-question to that. "Did or will any entity incur or bear any excessive financial expense in order to investigate, litigate, including civil settlements, or recover the remains or clean up or return the scene back to its normal state?" Again, using the example of possibly driving into a river—to recover the remains out of a vehicle, and especially if the waterway is very, very dangerous, it places other people at inherent risks, and we simply don't need to lose any more life or cause more damage or harm or expense to do that.

My last question would always be, "Has the deceased been offered any assistance in the past, which would have or could have been related to any cause and/or resulting in this incident?" So, did the deceased demonstrate early on, an issue, let's say, with alcohol abuse or substance abuse or any type of issue that would've required counseling? Again, as an

employer, you would like to think that you're going to support your staff. You're going to get them the help. The profession that we're in is difficult enough as it is and brings back with it some heavy baggage. To know that you have a problem, that you have an employee that has a problem, and that you don't offer them help and assistance as we would do anybody else in the street that we come in contact with, would almost be of negligent levels.

So, I would like to think that if you knew about it ahead of time, that you would've helped your employee out, you wouldn't have simply turned your back on them. Again, was the agency aware of any previous or current active or underlying problems that would've caused an issue? So, if you can answer those questions clearly, if you can answer them honestly, I think that you're safe to proceed with figuring out how it is that you would like to properly honor your officer.

Nick B.: And those are important questions and something that certainly chiefs and sheriffs need to think about when they're faced with this very challenging set of circumstances. Is there anything else that you would recommend that agencies can do to help prepare themselves for when they do have a line-of-duty death or even just the death of a sworn member who dies of natural causes as well as a suicide?

Dan F.: Sure. The strongest thing, first and foremost, that I want to get out to everybody that's listening is, is just to remember simply that everything that we do and how we serve in this capacity, it's not about me. It has nothing to do with me, even though I may be a coworker, an employee of that department. It truly is not about me. It's about serving the officer who has died. And it's about serving the family who is sitting graveside in his mourning. Everything that we do is about them. So, the sooner that you, as someone who is either in the planning, execution, ceremonial details, or elements, the sooner that you can get into your head and into your heart that you're there to give of yourself, not for you, and it's not your 15 minutes of fame, but it's for them, the better off that you're going to be, and the better that the event will take place.

The best thing that a department can do is you need to put down a good SOP or Standard Operating Procedure, work plan. You've got to put this in place, and it has to have in it the

different grade levels of funerals that you're going to experience. Obviously, the top of the line would be a line-of-duty death. The next one below that, and you're going to reduce your ceremonial protocol just slightly, keeping in mind that during a line-of-duty death, we give everything. We give our absolute all. It's got the final call. It's got the flyover. It's got everything that happens that you see in a law enforcement funeral that we can provide. An active duty death, you would just reduce your ceremonial protocol just slightly to reflect the nature of that grade level.

You would then go down to a retiree, which if I could insert at this time, if we do experience a death by suicide, in the training element that I work with, we always like to advise that if you're going to have a service that is going to be taking place and it's for a coworker that has died by suicide, that we recommend as long as you can proceed forward with the funeral, that you look at it possibly in the element of a retiree's service for grade level. And the reason why that we recommend this is that this person has decided to leave our profession—albeit, they left the profession permanently, and it's unfortunate that they did, but we always like to look at it that, again, they've retired from the profession of law enforcement. So, as long as we can proceed further, as long as we can answer those six questions and get good answers from those six questions, that there's no complications behind the scenes that we know of, that we can proceed further with a retiree's level funeral.

Now, the thing is that we want to make sure that we understand we're not here to glorify the act of suicide. That we don't want somebody else thinking, "Oh my God. Well, John died by suicide. Well, if I go out and decide I have a problem, and I go out and I decide to take my life by suicide, that they're going to give me this huge send off." That's not what we want to do. We want to make sure that we're not glorifying the act, but we are honoring the person. We're honoring their commitment to professionalism and to our profession and everything that they did while they were working as a law enforcement officer. And at that same time, we're still standing by our blue family, the next of kin, during the most horrible time. And we're making sure that we're not turning our back on them. We're there to support them, even during this most difficult hour.

So, you've got to get this in play. You have to put down a really good SOP. That way, when this does happen, you pull the book off the shelf, like everything else that we're prepared for. You go to your SOP on Department-Related Funerals, and you go to the section of line of duty, active duty, retiree—unfortunately, slash suicide. You can even include dignitaries. Say you have a council person that may have passed away, the mayor may be—seated mayor may die for some unknown reason. Your department may become involved in something like that. You may have a civilian employee, like a dispatcher, something could have happened, or a court officer, maybe a reserve officer that you'd like to honor, but it all has to be done within the realm of good protocol.

We always say, "Temper the grief with awe, but temper the honors with common sense." I've seen many, many times over the years, people sadly get the call for the funeral, and they lose all track of common sense, and it's almost like their 15 minutes of fame, and they go completely over the deep end. And it always makes me wonder, "What are you doing?"

Nick B.: Well, you, you only get one shot at this right, to get it right? So, it's really important that you do all of those things you just discussed. And I appreciate the fact that you mentioned how important it is to not honor such a death at the level of a line-of-duty death. And as you mention, not to overglorify the death.

Dan F.: You're absolutely correct, Nick. You can't elevate, unfortunately, the level of honors to anything close to an active duty or to a line of duty—you simply can't. The two can never meet, and it can never cross. It's difficult even with active duty and with line of duty because the ceremonial protocol is so close, few would understand the differences on what we're doing and why, even though we're reducing the ceremonial element or the protocol down to meet an active duty. But again, a lot of people that I've worked with over the years, when assisting them in funerals, things become very clouded. You become so emotionally charged and so emotionally involved, and it's that typical—once the gates are open and the horses are out of the barn, you can't get them back in.

Well, once you step over that line and you've lost focus of where you're at, it's hard to reel it down, and things once—it's kind of like a shark. It's just an eating machine. It will just consume you.

And next thing you know, you have a mess on your hands that's hard to recover from. So, sometimes it's best if you're too close to what's going on, either to step back, or take a secondary position, or to let somebody else handle it. I know with our state memorial team, that's where we're able to step in. We can be empathetic and sympathetic, but not so close that we're making bad decisions for the department. We're there to support and to help them and to advise them, not to hurt them. We're there to assist them in any way that they want. They can have as much assistance with the funeral as they want or need. Some of them are not capable of handling it whatsoever, either manpower-wise or experience-wise. So, we're always there to assist them in any way.

Nick B.: Well, Dan, you also assisted the SAFLEO Program in developing the Post-Suicide Event Guide, which folks can find online. And in that, one of the recommendations you made was also to consider a questionnaire for officers to fill out at the beginning of their career. Now, I know, I was a police officer for 26 years in Washington, DC, and we had a next of kin notification form, an emergency notification form, as well as our photograph, which of course, everybody darkly referred to as your death photo. But there was a recommendation made with regard to really sorting out some of the person's wishes and having the family already knowing about what it is they might like—for example, what about their religious preferences and so on.

Dan F.: Whenever we talk about this packet that we're referring to, I've heard it referred to all kinds of things. I've heard it referred to as the death packet. It's unfortunate. It's very sad. You can look at it in like your last will and testament professionally within a department, whatever it is that you want to call it. But the reality is, is that our law enforcement profession comes with serious and grave risks.

And we handle everybody else's problems. You go to a fatal car accident, and unfortunately, you have to take care of the mess that's there, or a shooting, a mass casualty, or anything else that comes along. But you really don't think of, "Well, what happens to me? What, what do I want, or what's going to happen if something happens to me in the middle of the day?" You don't have time to go back and say, "Well, I could have, should have, would have," or, "I really wished I would've let somebody know about this." And I don't even know if—how

many talk to their wives or husbands about it at home to make sure that they understand. But if nothing's written down, as far as what you would like to have happen or how you would like things to proceed, it's hard to go back and to assume that somebody knows the last wishes of the deceased and what they wanted and how they wanted things to proceed.

And again, it can cause a complex, complicated, heartbreaking, sometimes mistake-making decisions that are at the last moment. So, what we always recommend is that departments really should—when an officer is hired, it's a difficult conversation to have, but it's one that must be had. The officer should be filling out some forms that the department has devised. And there's a number of these documents that you can get as examples and reference material. But basically, it will cover all this personal information from, as you said, religious denomination, as we all know, the different religions may require different funeral protocol that you have to adhere to in order to honor that denomination. It's going to include family information, insurance information.

If a death occurs, who would you like to notify your family? How would you like them to be notified? There's so many mistakes that have happened and so much heartache and hurt simply by people thinking that they're doing the right thing, but they, in turn, have done the wrong thing. And it really, really has caused issues. You need to update insurance information. You need to update whether your marriage status is still intact. You can only imagine, if you don't think about it, that I was married. I became divorced. I became remarried, but I didn't take my original, my first wife's name off of the beneficiary policy for the department, and a death occurred, and now my former wife is getting my insurance benefits when my current wife should be. So, you need to update that information. It really can cause just a mind bender until you get into it and say, "Oh my God, we have a serious problem on our hands. And how do we handle it?" And unfortunately, the person that needs to handle it is no longer with us.

So, I strongly recommend that you do that. And I recommend that a minimum of once a year, the officer needs to come in—we always recommend that the department administration can keep these files in a sealed envelope, in a sealed file cabinet, where the only people that are accessible to them would be like

the administrator or the administration's secretary to get into it. An officer can obviously review that information at any time that they request. There should be a record of every time somebody goes into that file. And at minimum, every year, it should be updated. If there is no changes to be made, the officer can sign off on a piece of paper attached to the file, that as of this date, it's up to date. And if there isn't anything, they can go in, and they can make the appropriate changes. Don't wait until something happens and let somebody else try to make the decision they know better or know what's best for you when there's no one to confirm it. That's just not a way to do it.

Nick B.: And I think that takes us right back to the beginning, which is what this is all about, which is really getting out ahead of it. Being prepared, thinking about these difficult things in advance, and having the proper framework in place so that you can judge them and deal with them as they occur. Dan, I really want to thank you for taking the time to speak with us today on this really important topic, I encourage our listeners to visit SAFLEO at safleo.org for more information on this topic and other officer safety and wellness topics. Everyone listening today, until next time, stay safe, stay well and stay healthy.

Speaker 1: The SAFLEO Program is dedicated to providing training, technical assistance, and resources to law enforcement agencies, staff, and families to raise awareness, smash the stigma, and reduce and prevent law enforcement suicide. For additional information regarding the SAFLEO Program, please visit safleo.org. That's S-A-F-L-E-O.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter.

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Speaker 2: This project was supported by grant number 2018-VIBX-K003, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; the

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