

THE BEREAVEMENT CENTER

SUCCESS THAT STARTS WITH THE HEART

SUMMARY

The 2012-2013 San Diego County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) visited many San Diego County offices during their term, including the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office. During the visit, the Medical Examiner told the Grand Jury about a unique program.

The Bereavement Center within the Medical Examiner's Office, under the guidance of the Chaplain, offers resource direction and educational support for individuals and families at a time of great stress. Essential information provided by this Bereavement Center, especially during the critical time associated with an unexpected death, is needed to deal with the difficult situation. More than ten years ago, the Medical Examiner extended an invitation to a former San Diego Sheriff's Department volunteer chaplain to join his team. The Medical Examiner wanted to initiate a Bereavement Center and found that there were very few such programs either in California or across the nation.

Today, this Bereavement Center is the only one in the United States with a full-time chaplain. The man chosen to lead the Bereavement Center was someone who had years of experience as a chaplain for the Sheriff's Department. He was a lecturer, trainer, and had numerous courses in crisis management. The Chaplain receives no pay or benefits from the County.

The Bereavement Center found that the first question most people asked after experiencing an unexpected death is, "What do I do now?" In response to those inquiries, they developed a booklet explaining what to do in a crisis involving the sudden death of a loved one. Over 12,000 of these booklets have been distributed. A 501(c)(3)¹ charity was set up to pay the cost of printing the booklets, which are free to individuals. The Chaplain gives assistance to grieving individuals and families, referring them to whatever other resources are required to meet their needs. There is no cost to individuals for grief counseling under this program.

The Grand Jury commends the Bereavement Center for providing needed services to individuals and families in our County.

PURPOSE

The Grand Jury initiated a study of the Bereavement Center located at the Medical Examiner's Office. The Grand Jury's investigation focused on learning more about this outstanding program and the services provided by it. Many questions came up during the course of this study. The Grand Jury wanted information on:

- What happens when an unattended death occurs?
- Who has the responsibility of contacting the family?

¹ A tax exempt charitable organization

- If needed, is there any assistance available to the family concerning burial or cremation?
- What type of information is shared with the family of the deceased?
- Is there follow up contact to ensure that families are coping?

PROCEDURE

During this investigation, the Grand Jury conducted interviews and site visits to gather information from the following:

- County Office of the Medical Examiner
- Bereavement Center
- Public documents
- News articles.

DISCUSSION

Those who have experienced the death of a loved one know that the grief involved is overwhelming. A sudden death can cause great pain and hardship to those left behind. Professional guidance is essential to avoid the negative effects often associated with this trauma. The Medical Examiner's staff deals with death daily. The families of the deceased all need encouragement and ongoing support to cope with the emotional strain. The staff at the Medical Examiner's Office is also subject to stress from dealing with such life-changing events and the Bereavement Center offers direction and support to them as well.

This commendation report addresses an effective and innovative Bereavement Center that enhances the services of the County Medical Examiner. The facility offers a comforting environment in which to discuss one of life's most difficult occurrences - the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one. The Bereavement Center provides valuable services to those who lose a loved one under such extreme circumstances. The Chaplain, who heads the Bereavement Center, is responsible for notifying family members of deaths that occur within the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner in the County.

The Medical Examiner's staff exhibits an impressive sense of calm and serenity. The dedication of the Medical Examiner and the Chaplain at the Bereavement Center to preserving the dignity of the deceased while providing their unique services is genuine. The Chaplain shows deep compassion for the grieving family members.

When dealing with the unexpected loss of a young child's family member, special attention is paid to the child. There is an assortment of Beanie Babies® on a shelf in the Chaplain's office. The child is asked to "help the Chaplain out" by adopting and caring for an animal of their choosing. This gives the child something for comfort while the Chaplain counsels other family members.

The Chaplain offers important information to help relatives through an emotionally and, often times, financially devastating period in their lives. He has compiled many suggestions, resources and checklists that can help during the grieving. He also provides needed encouragement and ongoing support to minimize the effects of that stress.

An information booklet from the Bereavement Center is distributed to individuals and families. A number of professionals including doctors, psychologists, social workers, and legal advisors were interviewed to assist in writing this booklet. The booklet is the culmination of three years of research and collaboration. It includes step-by-step guidance and resources on issues that the individuals or families need to handle immediately after a death occurs. There have been requests from across the country to copy the booklet. Permission is granted with the stipulation that there be no cost to those who receive it.

This Bereavement Center is only one of four such programs in the United States that provide free counseling, education, and cremation assistance, as well as referrals. It is the only volunteer-led center of its kind in the country. In 2009, it received the National Association of Counties' Achievement Award noting that it does not receive public funding. In addition, the Bereavement Center Chaplain provides training to the American Red Cross Spiritual Care Team, the San Diego City Police and County Sheriff's Chaplain Teams, Azusa Pacific University, and the United States Border Patrol.

COMMENDATION

The 2012-2013 San Diego County Grand Jury commends the Bereavement Center at the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office for its years of dedicated service and positive impact on our community. We commend the Chaplain for exemplary devotion and heartfelt concern for all citizens of San Diego County. We also commend the Medical Examiner for having the foresight to provide this service.