

Take 5 Steps to Support Worker's Family After a Workplace Tragedy



Safety professionals work hard at preventing workplace tragedies from happening. But serious injuries and fatalities can still occur despite your best efforts. If the worst does happen, the way your company responds can make a difference to the family of the injured or deceased worker.

Threads of Life is an organization whose mission is to help families heal through a community of support and to promote the elimination of life-altering workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths. The organization has released a report, based on a survey of members who've experienced work-related injury or death in their families, provides some clear steps an employer can follow to connect with and support the family after a tragedy.

The report recommends that employers take these five steps:

Step #1: Go see the family. It's highly recommended that a senior manager, CEO, HR professional or other senior representative of the company go to see the family. If the employer has the duty to inform the family, in person, of a workplace death or serious injury, send a small team, including a senior manager, a staff person or workplace friend who knows the family, and a mental health professional, counsellor or member of the clergy. The team should be prepared to face strong emotions and shock. So before a tragedy, seek out training and resources to ensure the appropriate representatives are skilled in dealing with critical incidents, and communicating about and during tragedies.

Step #2: Keep the family informed. Have an internal discussion *ahead of time*, with legal consultation, about what company representatives may and may not say. Ideally, companies should develop a response plan and policy on communication before it's ever required, and make both available to anyone who may be asked to communicate with the family in the event of an incident.

Offer the family what information you can about what happened, acknowledging that you don't know all the details. Let them know there will be an investigation and assure them that you'll do everything in your power to prevent further tragedies. But don't say or promise anything you don't absolutely know to be true.

Step #3: Provide support. There are forms of support, both immediate and longer-term, which are meaningful to and appreciated by a family in the wake of a serious workplace injury or death, such as staying with the individual until another family member can arrive, driving relatives to the hospital and making phone calls to clergy. Make no assumptions about what will be helpful and ask what the family needs. But only offer what you know you can fulfill and, if you make an offer of assistance, be sure to follow through with it.

Other forms of support include:

- Company representatives visiting the hospital
- Cleaning out the worker's apartment
- Driving the injured or deceased person's vehicle home
- Helping with funeral costs or topping up coverage provided by workers' comp for funeral expenses
- Covering any travel or accommodation costs involved in travelling to the hospital or the work location.

Step #4: Honour the worker. Families understand that work must go on, but they value companies' efforts to honour the worker. In the case of a fatality, attending the funeral and allowing co-workers to attend is an obvious first step. Among survey respondents, in the best cases, employers honoured workers by creating a lasting memorial, such as:

- Planting a tree and having a memory stone made
- Creating a plaque and giving it to the family
- Organizing a memorial event at the workplace and inviting the family
- Donating to a charity of the family's choosing in honour of the worker
- Donating to a scholarship fund established by the family
- Dedicating or naming something (such as a garage, a park, a boat) in honour of the worker
- Sending flowers to the cemetery each year on the anniversary of the death
- Placing a memorial in the newspaper on the anniversary of the death.

Of course, a critical way employers can honour a worker is by conducting a thorough investigation and implementing changes to ensure the hazards involved in the tragedy are eliminated or controlled. As part of the communication and response plan, it's important to communicate the steps being taken by the company. Families will be relieved to know further tragedies will be prevented, although it comes too late for their loved one.

Step #5: Stay in touch. Families said they were touched when company representatives visited or phoned regularly, sent a card and continued to remember the injured or deceased employee months and years after the tragedy. *Bottom line:* Families appreciated when an employer maintained "open lines of communication" with them.