

# Bereavement Leave:

## *The Benefits of a Written Policy*

BY PAUL J. ANTONELLIS JR.

**M**ANY FIRE SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS TODAY have a bereavement leave policy. These policies provide the employee with time off from work to plan and attend a funeral and to deal with family matters surrounding a death. Many policies outline exactly who is covered and how many days will be provided to the employee.

However, most emergency service agency bereavement leave policies fall short when it comes to a coworker who died while on-duty. Firefighters traditionally call one another a brother or sister, referring to the fact that the fire service considers itself one big extended family. If we are an extended family, why do so many fire departments lack any formal bereavement leave for coworkers killed on duty? The following article will examine the need for including coworkers in bereavement leave policies.

### AT WHAT COST?

Researchers at the Grief Recovery Institute, a nonprofit educational foundation, estimate that American workers mourn the loss of 2.4 million loved ones each year. The Grief Recovery Institute reports that U.S. companies will lose more than \$75 billion annually to “hidden grief.” They also found 90 percent of those in physical jobs indicated a much higher incidence of physical injuries caused by reduced concentration. Of those reporting reduced concentration and injury, the loss of concentration may have directly resulted in additional time off from the job.

A fire department that experiences a line-of-duty death is forever changed. Firefighters and administrators need to understand that the dynamics of the department have changed and to respect the changes faced by the organization.

Bereavement leave is considered an unfunded liability by most towns and cities, because it is difficult to say just how many bereavement days will be used in a given year; therefore, these days are not budgeted. Additionally, it is very difficult for a fire service administrator to show a rate of return on his investment for providing bereavement leave for employees. The true benefits of bereavement leave often are not seen for weeks, months, or even years.

The socially accepted practice in the United States is to provide employees with three to five days off for bereavement leave after an immediate family member has died. “Immediate family” usually is defined as “spouse, parents, stepparents, siblings, children, stepchildren, grandparents, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, or grandchild.”

If you take a look at your department’s bereavement policy, you probably will not see under immediate family the term “coworker.” I submit that, for some of us, we are closer to

our “family” members in the station or on the job than to our biological family. But we do not cover this strong bond in any of our bereavement leave policies. In some cases, the bereavement leave is written very loosely and is left up to the determination of the chief, human resource director, or mayor. In that case, the decisions could be influenced by personalities, rash decision making, or poor judgment.

The cost of grief in the organization can be significantly higher if improperly or inadequately handled by administration. Having a written guideline or policy for dealing with a coworker killed on duty provides a framework to guide subordinates in their activities and to achieve and maintain regulatory compliance. This will generally remove the personalities and rash decision making from the process.

### BEREAVEMENT LEAVE VS. FUNERAL LEAVE

Bereavement leave is generally considered leave for the employee to plan and attend the funeral and to deal with sensitive family matters. The intent of bereavement leave is to provide employees with adequate time to be with their immediate family during a period of anguish, whether it be at the time of death, during preparation of funeral arrangements, or to attend the funeral. Generally, bereavement leave is time off with pay. This time is not deducted from accrued time such as sick, vacation, or personal days.

Funeral leave generally is considered leave for employees to attend the funeral or be a pallbearer in any case other than one covered under the bereavement leave section. The time off can range from a couple of hours to a full day. In some businesses, funeral leave will be deducted from the employee’s sick or vacation account. However, most fire departments provide all personnel time off to attend the funeral of a coworker. This leave may be for a couple of hours or a full day.

Most people who have lost an immediate family member will tell you that there is no magic number of days off to make things better. The standard three-to-five days off is a good start. Some people will need to take additional days off to deal with family matters or to deal with the lingering grief.

How many days off should a firefighter be given if someone in the department is killed in the line of duty? Once again, there is no magic number. Fire service administrators should be understanding of the needs of their employees and know that each person will process grief at a different rate. The best course of action is to discuss the needs with each employee.

Fire departments across the country need to take a close look at their bereavement leave policy and determine a policy that should be implemented should a coworker be killed. I have been teaching fire and law enforcement agencies nationally on preparing for a line-of-duty death/injury, and very few



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## ● BEREAVEMENT LEAVE

fire departments have a written policy for a bereavement leave when a coworker dies. The majority of fire service administrators will tell you they will give "time off" when needed, but this usually is not a written policy.

A written policy will provide employees with a frame of reference for benefits that will be given should a coworker be killed in the line of duty. This sends the message to the employees that the department is concerned about their health and well-being. The implementation of a bereavement leave for coworkers (hopefully) may be a "no cost" item for years for many of you. However, the department that uses the leave will find that the preplanning and implementation will be well worth the time and energy.

Supporting employees when a coworker is killed does not stop at preparing a bereavement leave policy. Many survivors report that they are overwhelmed by the death, making it difficult for the survivor to know what he wants.

Administrators and supervisors should take great care in not overwhelming the survivors. Administrators should talk with individual employees and the employees as a group. Verbal communication is critical during these times. Use memos, letters, and electronic communications with caution; they lack the personal touch and demonstrate that the administrator is removed from the process and the troops. Experts recommend that all employees be made aware of the benefits and support the department will provide should a coworker be killed in the line of duty.

Depending on your department policy for bereavement, coworkers may be required to return to work before they have coped with the loss. Departments need to be understanding of employees who have a difficult time processing the death. No two people will grieve at the same rate. In some rare cases, "complicated grief" can manifest into post-traumatic stress disorder. In these cases, a majority of departments will provide additional bereavement leave to the coworkers; however, the leave will be deducted from their vacation or sick time.

Now is the time to decide how an incident will be handled if employees are

in need of additional bereavement leave when a coworker is killed. Any request for additional bereavement leave should be given proper weight and should not be unreasonably denied. Employees who feel that the organization does not support them or understand what they are going through may have a prolonged grief process.

If your department is considering expanding bereavement leave policy to cover coworkers killed in the line of duty ("coworker" being defined as a brother/sister firefighter), this expansion likely will be limited to brother/sister firefighter(s) from the same fire department as the fallen firefighter. This can be further restricted to members of the same engine company, station, or shift, depending on the size of your department.

## THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF GRIEF

Grief has been shown to affect our work and social life. In addition, grief affects us in physical and emotional ways. Providing employees with bereavement leave is a step in the right direction to assist the employee in processing this grief.

Grief can impact on coworkers in several ways:

- Reduced concentration.
- Poor decision making.
- Poor supervision.
- Increased injury/illness rate.
- Anger.
- Anxiety.
- Lashing out at others.

## DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Coworkers who attend the funeral of a fallen firefighter show a strong and united front to the surviving family. A majority of the firefighters will attend the funeral of a fallen firefighter (coworker) with or without being granted time off from the department for bereavement leave. They will attend and take the time off as a matter of pride, dedication, and tradition.

Fire administration and coworkers may not fully understand the impact of the grief on fellow employees. Education and training are critical for fire service administrators and supervisors to prepare for a line-of-duty death. Employ-

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## ● BEREAVEMENT LEAVE

ees within the organization may need training on how to talk to and interact with one another after a sudden traumatic death of a coworker. Remember, employee safety has been violated, and many may feel vulnerable after a death of a coworker.

Given the hidden cost associated with grief in the workplace, I am suggesting that, with greater awareness, education, and guidelines, the tangible and intangible costs associated with grief can be reduced for the department.

The family bond that allows us to do our job so well can have a significant impact when we are faced with the loss of a coworker. If you offer the option for firefighters to request time off for bereavement, you will empower them and provide them with choices. If you just tell people they will be given time off, you are taking that decision-making process away from them and telling them that they are unable to make the decision.

Let's not leave this critical decision up to a person during such a traumatic time. Such decisions can be influenced by stress,

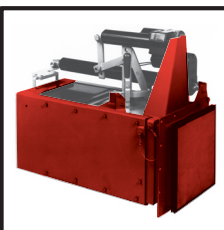
emotions, and personalities. Having a written policy/guideline in place before-hand will serve as a tool in the decision-making process. The simple decision to offer bereavement leave after a fellow firefighter has been killed will show personnel that the department is concerned about their mental health and well-being. ●

### REFERENCES

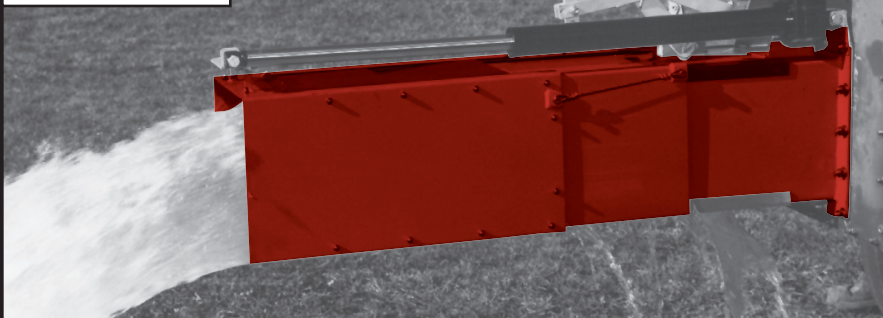
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● **PAUL J. ANTONELLIS JR., MA, CEAP, LADC1**, has more than 20 years in the fire service and has served in various capacities, including as chief of department. In addition, he has 11 years of law enforcement experience. He lectures internationally and is the author of many articles and two books. He teaches in the undergraduate and graduate fire science programs of two colleges.



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