

Department of Justice
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Victim Services Division



VICTIM & FAMILY BRIEFINGS

A Guide for Law Enforcement Officials

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS	3
PREPARING FOR THE BRIEFING	4
Attendees.....	4
Selecting a Briefer.	5
Travel Assistance.	5
Venue Selection.....	6
Content Planning.	6
Common Concerns.....	7
DURING THE BRIEFING	8
Communication Tips for the Briefing.....	8
CLOSING THE BRIEFING	9
CONCLUSION	10

INTRODUCTION

Regular communication with victims and families is a fundamental part of effective victim family assistance, and provides information and understanding at a time when victims and families need them greatly. Victim and family briefings enable law enforcement authorities to fulfill their legal obligation by providing consistent and timely information to victims and family members and an understanding of what happened to victims of crime. Providing this information can help diminish the ill effects that victims and family members often experience following traumatic events, including prolonged grief, acute distress, and disruption of normal functioning.

The Victim Services Division of the FBI offers the following general considerations and recommendations as a guide for law enforcement partners—federal, state, local, and tribal—as they plan briefings with victims and families in their jurisdictions, especially those affected by mass casualty incidents.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Victim and family briefings should be conducted to inform victims and families of key case developments, especially before such details are released to the media. Failing to do so will cause these groups to lose trust in the organization(s) managing this process. In the event that information is released or leaked before being provided to victims, consider organizing a conference call or scheduling a briefing as soon as possible.

In addition to informing victims and families of key case developments, the following scenarios would warrant a family briefing:

- **The immediate aftermath of a crime to provide information on recovery and status of victims.** For high impact events, such as the Oklahoma City Bombing and 9/11, initial family briefings focused on the status of efforts to recover victims, alive and deceased, and explaining the recovery, identification, and autopsy processes.
- **The introduction of criminal charges or additional investigative and victim services points of contact.** This includes longer term case status updates, such as the announcement of new charges or new case developments, and presentation of information developed from the investigation that can help families understand events leading up to the crime such as reconstructions and audio-visual recordings. This is especially important if this information will be used in trial or released to the public through Freedom of Information requests.
- **The memorialization of an incident site or release of artifacts to a museum or memorial exhibit.** In such scenarios, it is recommended that officials brief potential memorialization plans that pertain to the incident site or artifacts and to the hear questions and concerns of victims and family members.

Victim and family briefings require effective communication and thorough consideration. At a high level, it is important to remember the following as you plan and prepare for victim and family briefings:

- Victim Service Providers (VSPs) should always be present to tend to the needs of families and provide crisis intervention or additional support.

- In the aftermath of crime, victims and families have the right to information from a trusted, official source in a timely manner.
- While scheduling a briefing around the time of an anniversary can be helpful, especially if the case has been ongoing for years, it is best to avoid the actual anniversary day, as they may be particularly difficult for victims and their families. Some victims and families will have their own ways of getting through that specific day.
- As you seek to schedule your briefing, be particularly mindful of any funerals, religious observations, or customs that may also coincide with the proposed meeting.

PREPARING FOR THE BRIEFING

Attendees. Before preparing the content of a victim/family briefing, it is important to identify who will be attending the event. In federal law, eligible victims can include families of deceased victims, injured victims, and present/not injured individuals who were direct witnesses to violence and whose lives were also threatened by proximity. Understanding your audience will help you tailor your content and address potentially conflicting needs and sensitivities of victim populations. Recommendations for managing briefing attendance are as follows:

- Limit the number of official participants to only those who are necessary. Aside from VSPs, consider including only those who will deliver meaningful information and/or are able to answer questions from family members.
- Briefings should only include victims and/or family members. While we strongly discourage the inclusion of minors under the age of 14 in these meetings, allow for parents or guardians to ultimately determine whether adolescent family members should also attend.
- At times, victims and family members may want their personal attorneys to attend briefings. If a victim or family member makes this request, please consult with your Chief Division Counsel's Office for legal guidance. Whether a victim or family member's personal attorney may attend a briefing is fact specific and will vary depending upon each particular situation. If personal attorneys are permitted to attend, briefers must not provide any legal opinions, theories, advice, or conclusions about the case. Additionally, if a victim's counsel asks legal questions, briefers must not answer these questions. Rather, the briefer must politely decline to answer the question and offer to provide a response at a later date. The briefer should then promptly contact the appropriate person(s) within their organization for legal guidance and assistance in responding. During the briefing, no information can be disclosed that could interfere with the investigation, reveal any sensitive investigative details, or make reference to uncharged third party actors.
- Consider holding separate briefings for NOK of the deceased and injured as their needs and experiences will likely differ from other groups attending the general session. Additionally, one group (e.g. victims, PNI, NOK, family members) may not feel comfortable posing certain questions as they may be seen as insensitive to the other groups in attendance.

- Be sure to select a time that is convenient for attendees; be particularly cognizant of those residing abroad or in other time zones.
- For those unable to attend in-person consider setting up a phone bridge or other form of remote access. Some injured victims may still be hospitalized or there may be family members who reside abroad or are otherwise unable to attend in-person for health reasons, child care or employment obligations, geographical considerations, or due to individual coping styles. Organizers should ensure that these victims and family members have the opportunity to participate. When possible, have a VSP or local victim advocate present with those who are unable to attend in person.
- Whereas divisions often occur within families, be willing to reasonably accommodate multiple representatives within a family unit or between a family and a partner.
- Determine whether there will be a need for linguistic services, and if so, be sure to allow sufficient time to provide interpreters them with general recommendations for interacting with victims.
- If electronic devices will be used for interpretation services or to involve those who are unable to attend in person, be sure to have an IT person present to handle any technical issues that may arise.
- Consider coordinating for a certified Facility dog to be present during the briefing. As opposed to Therapy dogs, Facility dogs are purpose bred and trained, while their handlers are trauma trained and members of the criminal justice system. In short, these dogs and their handlers are especially adept at working in emotionally charged situations such as courtrooms, hospitals, interviews, and victim and family briefings. Those interested in using facility dogs for an event can reach out to their local law enforcement, prosecutor's office, or FBI victim specialist for potential resources in their area.

Selecting a Briefer. Selecting a suitable senior official in your organization to brief the victims and families is extremely important. It shows that your organization takes their concerns seriously and is committed to their case. The following are key considerations for choosing a suitable senior official for the briefing:

- The official should be someone senior from the organization leading the investigation, and must be able to adeptly manage dynamic, emotionally charged situations with patience, compassion, calmness, and confidence.
- If there are multiple agencies investigating the crime (e.g. both federal and state charges have been filed), consider including briefers from other agencies to cover topics related to their casework.
- For follow-on briefings, make every effort to use the same senior official from previous briefings—families will come to rely greatly upon this official.

Travel Assistance. As much as possible, assist victims and families with travel arrangements and accommodations. Depending on the crime, funding may be available through the FBI's Victim Services Division (see contact information on page 10).

Venue Selection. Selecting a proper venue for the briefing will set an appropriate tone for the briefing and can greatly facilitate openness in discussion. Consider the following:

- The meeting should be held in a building that is both reasonably accessible to those with disabilities or special needs and that is away from media. Choose a comfortable location such as a school auditorium or a hotel conference room, as long as the venue can be secured from media and uninvited participants.
- If the group is small enough, consider arranging chairs in a circle or semi-circle to foster a greater sense of inclusion, and be sure to have water, coffee, tea, tissues, and snacks on hand.
- If the meeting is taking place at a government office or other secure location, be sure to inform victims of any security restrictions and requirements and have an adequate number of escorts to facilitate their access to the site.
- Ensure a person with whom attendees are familiar is available to greet them as they arrive (e.g. VSP or Law Enforcement Officer assigned to the case).
- Be sure to have Emergency Medical Services on hand in the event they are needed.
- If possible, select a venue that is accessible by public transit and has a secure parking lot. If the venue charges parking fees, consider working with venue staff to issue parking vouchers to cover the costs for attendees.

Content Planning. Curating applicable content for your briefing will ensure that all important discussion topics are covered and will minimize the likelihood of a protracted Q&A session at the end. Recommendations for planning content for your briefing include:

- Tailor your content to the victims and families who will be attending the briefing. Work with local VSPs to better understand the experiences, needs, nuances, and expectations of these victims and family members.
- If feasible, review victim biographies prior to the briefing. Being familiar with this type of information will show victims and their families that you and your organization takes their case seriously.
- In addition to providing case details and updates, briefings should focus on the topics or issues of greatest importance to attendees—if possible request questions from the attendees ahead of time.
- Be cognizant of the divide between information that is permissible or impermissible to share. Be prepared to explain why certain case details cannot be disclosed or cannot be disclosed at that particular point in time.
- As appropriate, be sure to correct any misinformation that may have come out in the media, especially details that could be distressing to survivors or family members.

- Refrain from sharing especially disturbing details in the general session. For individuals wanting to know difficult and personalized details, private meetings can be held at the conclusion of the larger session. Let family members know that they can meet separately with key personnel if they want to discuss the details of the last moments, death, and/or autopsy of their loved one(s).
- Never show attendees photographs related to the crime without discussing with a VSP first. Such photography can trigger traumatic responses, and particularly so when viewers have not been prepared beforehand. Review all audio and visual presentations closely to ensure that this type of material had not been included.
- Since families in acute distress often have difficulty absorbing and retaining complex information, briefers should be prepared to answer the same question multiple times.
- Consider providing a meeting agenda to ensure that topics are discussed in a structured and timely manner, respective of other discussion topics on the agenda.
- Be sure to allow time at the beginning and end of your briefing for questions, reflection, and attendees to interact with each other.

Common Concerns. The following concerns have been expressed during briefings and other communications with victims and their families, generally. To address these concerns consider the following:

- *A perception that their case is receiving little or no attention*
Consider discussing the complexities of the investigative and criminal justice processes, and the role of your organization therein. Additionally, consider sharing the number of personnel working on their case, the number of leads that have been pursued, and/or any other information that demonstrates the organization's effort and dedication to solving the crime.
- *Insufficient levels of communication or delays in the conveyance of new information*
Assure victims that any communication issues will be addressed promptly, and encourage victims and family members to maintain regular contact with their VSP who can help answer questions and/or coordinate responses from other government officials.
- *Distrust or lack of confidence in public officials*
Distrust and lack of confidence often stem from negative interactions with law enforcement, dissatisfaction with case outcome, or from a belief that the crime could or should have been prevented. Sometimes, it helps to explain the challenges and nuances of the criminal justice process, especially when it comes to taking law enforcement action based on perceived threats.

The following have been identified as additional considerations in the days and weeks following mass casualty crimes, including acts of terrorism:

- In mass casualty contexts, victims are often identified in the hours and potentially even days following the incident. Be prepared to review and repeat information discussed in previous briefings, particularly as additional family members arrive.

- If regularly scheduled briefings are warranted in the days immediately following a mass casualty incident, be sure to establish a consistent, regular schedule.
- Sometimes it may make sense to hold a briefing even when nothing of significance has occurred since the last briefing. The regular cadence of these meetings can provide much needed structure to victims and families following these horrific events.

DURING THE BRIEFING

The following are considerations and guidelines for conducting the family briefing and interacting with attendees:

- The briefer should expect a wide range of emotions. Shock and grief affect people in very different ways. Some attendees may be inconsolable or even accusatory while others may seem emotionless or tangential.
- Expect tensions to exist among families or between family members. If soliciting input from families, be sure to address the widest range of individuals within the group.
- At the start of the meeting ask all officials to introduce themselves. If practical, consider whether it would be beneficial for victims and family members to do likewise.
- At times family members may want to share something about the person they lost, feeling the need to humanize their loved ones to government officials.

Communication Tips for the Briefing. The following are some guidelines to be conscious of while briefing victims and families:

- Be mindful of your demeanor, delivery, and terminology. The manner in which a message is conveyed is often as important as the content of the message, and victims and families will be especially attuned to these nuances.
- Refrain from using the terms “victim” or “closure.” Instead, consider using the name of the decedent or “healing process,” or a moniker the family or group has adopted to describe the victim(s). Additionally, avoid using phrases such as “I understand” or “It could have been worse.” Keep in mind that some people may want answers or accountability instead of closure. There may be instances where all you can reasonably say is, “I’m so sorry.”
- For family members of deceased victims, empathy is imperative to establishing credibility and trust. Consider beginning your interactions with a sincere expression of concern, such as “I am sorry for your loss,” or “On behalf of my organization, I want to express our deepest condolences for your loss.” For injured victims consider beginning with an empathic statement such as “I am sorry this happened to you.”
- Always refrain from responding to family members’ grief responses by sharing your own experiences with loss. Such expressions can often lead to ‘grief contests’ or hurtful comparisons.

- Before responding to a question, repeat or paraphrase the question back to the inquirer to ensure that you appropriately understood their question.
- Be as open as possible, and when unable to fully answer a question, thoroughly explain the reason for not being able to do so. For answers that require information that is unknown but available, provide a POC and a plan for relaying the requested information.
- Avoid being defensive. Before responding, fully listen to any concerns that victims or families may have, even if they are mistaken or misinformed.
- When appropriate, apologize for any mistakes or negative interactions that may have occurred, and express a commitment to working with them to establish a more suitable approach for future interactions.
- Designate someone to take notes. This shows attendees that their comments, questions, and concerns are taken seriously, and will allow you to follow-up more comprehensively as needed.
- Be cognizant that any notes taken during these briefings would likely be deemed discoverable in judiciary proceedings. Consider meeting beforehand to discuss this consideration with the person who will be taking notes.
- Avoid speculating on any aspect of the case—especially those pertaining to case outcomes or on the level of punishment that alleged perpetrators should receive.
- Encourage victims and families to rely on the investigators, instead of the media, for factual information about the investigation.

CLOSING THE BRIEFING

There is an art to bringing a family briefing to a close. Consider the following suggestions for closing a briefing in a respectful and empathetic way:

- Allow time to provide a short summary of the information that was covered during the briefing.
- Be sure to thank people for participating.
- Let attendees know what will likely come next, how they will continue to receive information, who will be in touch with them, and who will be available if they need someone to ask questions or talk with in the interim.
- Plan to remain in the facility beyond the close of the briefing to allow for victims and families to ask additional questions and seek support before departing.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, victim and family briefings serve to humanize a criminal justice process wherein victims and families can feel unsupported or ignored. Victim and family briefings can be a challenging, emotionally difficult time for both victims and families, but they are an integral part of the criminal justice and healing processes at a particularly catastrophic time in their lives. These briefings provide them with needed information in a timely manner from a trusted, official source. Effectively preparing for, coordinating, and conducting these meetings demonstrates our commitment to victims and families and plays a crucial role in helping them in their time of need.

Federal Bureau of Investigation
Victim Services Division
J. Edgar Hoover Building,
935 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Room 3329
Washington, DC 20535
(202) 324-3000
www.fbi.gov/resources/victim-services