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Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences helps communicate bad news to Latino Families

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By Silvia Struthers

About 25 percent, or 900, of all cases that the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences serves annually involve Latino victims.

That volume of cases prompted the agency that is charged with determining the cause and manner of death accidental, violent or unexplained medical complications to find a way to help the families of those victims who speak Spanish and to communicate the news of a death in their language.

And to carry out the program, the agency partnered with Christian chaplain groups that not only speak Spanish but also have a good understanding of the Latino culture.

Chaplains receive special training before they can volunteer.

The Institute of Forensic Sciences, through a victim assistance specialist, also offers referrals to counseling and support groups for family members.

"It is the first time in Texas that a medical examiner's office has offered such a service," says Kathryn Haden-Pinneri, assistant deputy chief medical examiner at the Institute of Forensic Sciences.

"The biggest impact we've seen through this program is that the families have expressed gratitude for not having received the news by phone," says Haden-Pinneri referring to the way the agency in the past communicated the news of a death.



[Chaplain, Linda Montes, left, and forensic pathologist Kathryn Haden-Pinneri collaborate on a new program to help bring comfort to Latino families.]

PHOTO BY GARY FOUNTAIN

LA VOZ DE HOUSTON



[Doctor Kathryn Haden-Pinneri, left, and Chaplain Linda Montes, right, of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, is offering a new program to help notify families who speak Spanish of the death of their loved ones.]

PHOTO BY GARY FOLINTAIN

"There is much less anger when they receive the news in person," she says.

The chaplains are sent to a family's home only when the victim has been identified in order to avoid errors. Chaplains also work with the Institute to help translate from English into Spanish and provide a better understanding between the Institute and families.

Haden-Pinneri says the agency investigates and determines the cause and manner of death. The pathologists share the findings with police, which enables them in their investigation.

"I think the most important support for the family at the time of a death is to be present," says Linda Montes, chaplain with Christian Chaplain Force International. "Offering a hug and listening... it really is not important or necessary for us to 'fill the gap' with our words."

For Montes, "it is important to know that someone is with you while you regain the strength to face what lies ahead."

One example

Mary Ann Monroy, owner of a business that teaches driver's safety, lost her son, Ruben Farfan, 21, a few weeks ago in a car accident. The boy was driving at night on a poorly maintained road.

"Chaplains helped amidst the pain," says Monroy, "to take the news emotionally, but not quietly, because you can't ... it was more warm, more personal than a call."

Haden-Pinneri explains that the agency has few employees who speak Spanish and that chaplains can ensure that the information is communicated to the family accurately and without confusion.

"Many times during the grieving process, the person can't listen or fully comprehend what we're trying to say," said the doctor.

Montes, meanwhile, says that the reactions are different depending on the case and the family dynamics.

"When you arrive, you have to see what the family's first response is and then respond to that emotion," said the chaplain.



"Sometimes it's crying or anger initially, even against us, because we are giving them the news. Then, if you give the family time, they process the information," she says.

For security, a partner or a Sheriff's deputy always accompanies the chaplains, Montes explained.

As part of our Hispanic culture, she adds, we like to surround ourselves with people even in difficult times like death, because we can share in what happened and feel supported.

"If the person is away from home and family, it is helpful for them to share some memories of the deceased... knowing that by sharing those memories, the deceased's life had meaning," said the chaplain.

Montes was one of the chaplains who helped the family of Farfán following his accident and death.

"It's never easy having to notify a family that their loved one has died, but I think it is even more difficult when it is a young man," she says.

"In this case, the family began to share details of the life of this young man. They showed me pictures of his younger sister's quinceañera, and how he helped her and had plans to start college," says the chaplain.

"And while sharing these memories of this young man's life, neighbors began arriving, offering help, bringing food and juice, and also sharing beautiful stories of pleasant moments with Ruben," she adds. "It was the community coming together to give the family warmth and a hug when they needed it most."



RESOURCES: Places to find help

After a death occurred ...

- During the first 24 hours - If the death was the result of a crime, and you don't feel safe, call 911.
- If you feel safe are in emotional distress, call the Crisis Hotline: (713) 526-8088 (Spanish).
- Forensic investigators can answer questions about a death and can also connect to a particular department, if necessary. Call (713) 796-6740.
- For information on a death certificate, an autopsy report or the status of a case, call: (713) 796-6775.

Other contacts: Support Groups and Counseling for Families and Children

Bo's Place

713-942-8339 | www.bosplace.org

Houston Area Women's Center

Centro para Mujeres del Area de Houston
(para familias y víctimas de violencia doméstica)
713-528-6798 | www.hawc.org

Compassionate Friends

Amigos Compasivos
1-877-969-0010 | www.compassionatefriends.org

Parents of Murdered Children

Padres de Niños Asesinados
1-888-818-POMC (7662) | www.pomc.com

Victim Assistance Centre

Centro de Asistencia a Víctimas
713-755-5625 | www.victimassistancecentre.com

The Attorney General-Texas/Crime Victim Services

El Fiscal General-Texas/Servicios para Víctimas de Crímenes
1 (800) 983-9933 | www.oag.state.tx.us/victims

Harris County District Attorney/Victims' Rights Division

Fiscal del Distrito del Condado de Harris /División de Derechos de las Víctimas
(713) 755-6655 <http://app.dao.hctx.net/HelpingVictims/HelpingVictims>

SOURCE: Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences