



MISSOURI FIRE SERVICE  
FUNERAL ASSISTANCE TEAM  
FUNERAL SERVICE GUIDE

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**This article appeared in the March / April 2005 issue of National Fire & Rescue. It offers an excellent perspective to keep in mind when planning a funeral. We thought we should share it with you, as it sums up our beliefs and follows the ideals in which our funeral protocols were written.**

*Dear Fire Service Professional,*

*We published Chief Dan Jones' editorial in our March/April issue and have received numerous letters and e-mails in response to his opinions. To make sure we're reaching all of our audience with this information, we'd like to share it with you here.*

*Sincerely,  
The Editors of National Fire & Rescue*

### **WHEN EMOTIONS TAKE OVER: PLANNING A FD FUNERAL**

This is an uncomfortable subject to write about, and it will be uncomfortable for you to read. I have thought about this for a long time, and it is a subject that doesn't get discussed but should be. It should be thought out and talked about, especially before you find yourself—or your department—in the awful position of planning a fire department funeral. I am not talking about a funeral for a line-of-duty death. I am talking about the terrible situation where a member of your department dies or is killed off duty, and there is a push to provide for a traditional fire department funeral.

I have faced that situation more than once, not only within my own department, but also in departments of colleagues, when an active firefighter or fire officer passes away after a brief illness or an accident. Everyone in the department is totally shocked and caught off guard. We respond to situations all the time that involve tragic or untimely deaths and think we are steeled against it, but when it is one of our own, we react with shock and grief like any normal human being. It is especially hard if the death was totally unexpected or happened to a person of youth or someone in his prime. The natural reaction is to want to do all you can to show your respect for that colleague and to honor his family. We have many traditions in the fire service, and funerals rich with ceremony, honor and memorable symbolism are one of the strongest.

The traditions of fire department funerals have many elements and individual acts of honor. The more recognizable traditions include uniformed pallbearers and honor guards; Maltese cross floral arrangements; ringing or sounding of final alarms; presentation of badges, helmets or flags to family members; fire trucks in the funeral procession; rows of uniformed firefighters lining the walk for the family at the funeral; a black-draped fire truck to bear the casket in the procession; bagpipes; crossed aerials over the funeral procession route; and several others. All of these elements are intended to show honor and respect to a fallen colleague. Fire department funerals, whether line-of-duty or not, are always emotional and leave lasting impressions on everyone who attends and even those who see it passing by.

Thank God most fire departments will never have to contend with a line-of-duty death and the subsequent funeral ceremony. This is absolutely the most horrible event for any department and has ramifications, both short- and long-term, that only those who have experienced it can fully understand. However, the Fire Service has a strange fascination with the traditions of funerals, and the emotional pressure to provide such a funeral for a lost member—even when it doesn't come in the line of duty—can be great both within the department and from the family. This situation can create a very uncomfortable dilemma for a department and its leaders.

The question I pose is this:

***If you provide a full-honors fire department funeral for a member who is lost off duty, and you use all of the traditions that you know of and can provide, what will you do should a member of the department be lost in the line of duty at a later time?***

You have inadvertently created a situation whereby you have nothing extra to provide. I have seen this occur, and it is a very difficult situation that would have been avoided if some restraint had been exercised during a difficult and emotional time. I think there is a greater potential for this problem in smaller departments that have never, or only very rarely, experienced the loss of a member. When it does happen, emotions take over and everyone wants to do all they can, and before anyone thinks about it, a full-honors fire department funeral is provided in a situation that didn't really warrant it, which in turn may take away from a future loss.

Don't get me wrong. The loss of any member of a department is tough, and anyone who serves in this noble service should be honored for that service. I lost a member of my department several years ago in an off-duty accident. It was very emotional and we wanted to honor his service. But, with the full understanding of his family, we did not provide a full-honors type of service. I believe that several traditions should always be reserved for a line-of-duty death service. By holding some traditions back only for this purpose, the recognition of line-of-duty sacrifice is preserved. For example, I believe the tradition of bearing the casket on the hose bed of a fire engine and sounding the last alarm should be used only in a line-of-duty service. That is only my belief and yours may differ, but my point is that we need to keep some of the traditions more sacred.

It is both OK and advisable to include some fire department traditions and ceremonies of honor in the funeral of a lost colleague, even if the nature of loss was unrelated to the fire service. Just don't use all the traditions. Save some of the ceremonies and symbols. The greatest of your traditions, whatever you decide those are, should be reserved for a line-of-duty-death funeral. The other part to consider is the wishes of the family, along with their religious beliefs and stipulations. These are two important parts of the process that must be considered before suggesting the use of elements from fire service traditions.

## PURPOSE

Fire Departments throughout the State of Missouri have had to, or may face the difficult task of being involved in an official funeral for one or more of its members. One of the more difficult questions the department must decide upon is what types of funeral honors are appropriate for the deceased.

In making a decision, primary consideration must be given to the family's feelings and desires, as well as past or future practices of the department.

## SCOPE

This guideline defines different levels of honor with corresponding suggested arrangement options.

To establish consistency, it is recommended that departments adopt a funeral protocol plan prior to its need.

*During the entire funeral process, the department must highly consider the deceased member's family's wishes.* Before any plan is instituted, the deceased member's family must agree with the department's intended participation. The family may choose to forgo some suggested and appropriate level of honor services, however, family should not influence an inappropriate increase of the level of honor services.

## ASSISTANCE

The Missouri Fire Service Funeral Assistance Team is available at all times to answer questions or assist in funeral matters. This committee has members who have been trained on funeral matters and people with extensive funeral experience. We can assist you in many ways. We will respond to your Line of Duty incidents bringing necessary supplies and knowledge of the benefits processes. We will also provide guidance for non line of duty incidents as well as offering our supplies for use. The supplies are offered on a first request basis with priority given to Line of Duty incidents.

The team can be reached for immediate activation by calling 1-888-4911HELP, or for general questions, via email at [info@mofirefuneral.org](mailto:info@mofirefuneral.org), or through our website at [www.mofirefuneral.org](http://www.mofirefuneral.org).

Our website offers downloadable ceremony protocols and links to online information that may be of assistance, as well as postings of funeral notices.

## LEVEL OF SERVICES

### LEVEL ONE (1)

**This is the HIGHEST level of ceremony. It is reserved for firefighters who die as a result of line of duty incident or direct job related event.** This may include members whose death has stemmed from injuries or illness directly sustained during active duty. This may include heart attack, stroke, and mental illness (suicide) under certain circumstances.

### LEVEL TWO (2)

This level of service is available to firefighters who die while an active member, but the death was not job or duty related.

### LEVEL THREE (3)

This level of service is available to inactive members that is not job or duty related or for the death of an affiliate member.

## SERVICE OPTIONS

### WITH SUGGESTED LEVEL OF APPROPRIATENESS

American Flag (1, or if military veteran of war)  
Badge Shrouds (1,2,3)  
Bagpipers (1,2)  
Bell Ceremony (1,2,3)  
Bugler (1) (or if Military Veteran, 1,2,3)  
Casket Vigil (1,2,3)  
Department Apparatus in procession (1,2)  
Eulogy (1,2)  
Fire Apparatus Caisson (1)  
Fire Apparatus Flower Unit (1,2)  
Full Fire Apparatus Procession (1)  
Firefighter Funeral Flag (1,2,3)  
Firefighters Visitation Walk Through (1,2,)  
Flags ½ mast (1) \* (only by order of Governor)  
Hearse (2,3)  
Honor Guards - Color Guards (1)  
Ladders - Crossed or with Large Flag (1,2)  
Last Alarm Ceremony (1,2)  
Sea of Blue (firefighters march) (1)  
Station Bunting (1,2,3)  
Vehicle Bunting (1,2)

## DEFINITIONS

**Line of Duty:** A death that is the result of traumatic injury or illness directly sustained while performing duties.

**Active Member:** A full-time or volunteer member of an agency serving in an active capacity.

**Inactive Member:** A retired or former member of an agency who remains in good standing.

**Affiliate Member:** An individual that has served in some other capacity with the agency.  
(i.e.: Director, Commissioner, Trustee)

**Non-Duty Related Death:** Death that results from injury or illness that is not directly related in the performance of their duties.

**Fire Apparatus Caisson:** Fire Department Apparatus used to carry the casket for line of duty related deaths.

**Fire Apparatus Flower Unit:** Fire Department Apparatus that transport flowers during the procession.

**Casket Vigil:** One or Two Uniformed Fire Service Members standing guard at casket during the visitation.

**Color Guard - Honor Guard:** A formal - trained unit of fire service staff that carry ceremonial flags and other implements, that participate in marching and other formalized drill procedures.

**Badge Shroud:** Black elastic, horizontally covering the uniform badge. Also known as a "mourning band".

**Funeral Bunting:**

**Station:** Mourning drapes that are placed on the outside of the fire station.

**Vehicle:** Mourning drapes that are used to adorn the Fire Apparatus participating in the caisson or flower unit.

**Firefighters Visitation Walk Through:** A predetermined time during the visitation when uniformed members and dignitaries enter for a unified tribute.

**Sea of Blue (Firefighters March):** Non detailed uniformed members and visiting department members' procession. Members may walk in a procession or create a corridor that the casket passes through, or both.

**Bell Ceremony:** Portable Fire Service Bell that is tolled at the conclusion of the bell ceremony reading.

**Last Alarm:** Dispatch tones out agency and reads last alarm information, which includes demographic and career information.

**Flag:**

**American:** Provided to honorable discharged Military Veterans by the Federal Government. Can be used to drape the casket of a Veteran

**Fire Service:** A flag that may be purchased from our group used to adorn the casket of non-military firefighters.