



First-of-its Kind Program Helps Grieving Families Navigate Postmortem Process

By [Kathleen Smith](#) | Texas Medical Center News

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HELPING EASE THE PAIN—Vanessa Trevino, left, a forensic investigator with the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, and Amanda Haacker, a victims' assistance specialist with the institute's Family Assistance Unit, help calm and comfort a family member at the scene of a death, and collect information critical to the death investigation. (Photo: Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences)

Picture the situation: a sudden death occurs in a family; nothing could mentally prepare family members for such a tragedy. Affairs are not in order, and what are they to do?

This scenario comes to light daily in Harris County. Until recently, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences – home of the medical examiner's office – received about 300 calls each month from families in this exact predicament. They needed to know how to obtain a death certificate, burial preparation and funeral information, and maybe even where and how to get grief counseling.

Recognizing this need, the institute's Investigations Division created a Family Assistance Unit. A few years ago, the groundwork for the unit was laid and last fall the Houston-Galveston Area Council awarded a grant to implement the program, which is now the first of its kind in the United States.

"We saw an opportunity to fill a need for families by providing a calm and reassuring voice, and to help at a time when they are facing a lot of emotions," said Bethany Bless, a forensic investigator who assisted with the planning of the new unit.

Most investigators, like Bless, are trained to gather death evidence that helps pathologists determine the cause and manner in which a person died. Unlike Bless, most investigators are not also social workers.

Bless said she wanted to take more time with these families to ensure they got the resources they needed.

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“It’s emotionally and physically taxing,” she said. “Everyone who is on scene wants to be there, but there’s no way to see the things you see and hear the things you hear and not have some emotional connection.”

In January, Amanda Haacker, a licensed master social worker, took the reigns as the Family Assistance Unit’s victims’ assistance specialist.

Now she proactively contacts families of the deceased and helps them understand how to go about obtaining a death certificate and autopsy report. She also makes counseling referrals for adults, families and children, and other social service agencies. All suggested services are nonprofit and in close proximity to the families’ homes.

Haacker also responds to scenes to help comfort families and assist investigators when needed. When a family is in shock and overcome with emotion, it’s often challenging for investigators to get the facts surrounding a sudden death. Haacker acts as a liaison between the investigators and the family to get these crucial details.

“My role is one of support ... support to the families, and support to the investigators who are first on the scene representing the institute,” said Haacker. “My very first scene was memorable ... well, because it was my first. An infant had died. Talking to the parents and the sitter about the baby’s impact on their lives was very emotional.”

Haacker said taking in others’ emotions can be very draining.

“But it’s rewarding to know how grateful they are,” she said.

Within a few months of its founding, the Institute of Forensic Sciences’ Family Assistance Unit has been recognized by families, doctors and chaplains for the care and support it provides to families. In March, the unit was presented with an Award of Recognition from the Christian Chaplain Force International for the services it provides.

In the future, the institute would like to add more social workers to the unit’s staff and offer more acute grief counseling training and workshops to help hard-working investigators cope with cases.

“We don’t close,” Bless said. “We work nights, weekends and holidays.”

Since the Family Assistance Unit began operating in January, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences has seen a 50 percent reduction in calls.

For more information, visit www.hctx.net/ifs.

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