

2 moms say cops failed to tell them sons died

The women have been campaigning to make prompt notification of families mandatory.

By **JIM STRATTON**

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The yellow billboard competes for attention with a handful of others hawking Famous Phil's CheeseSteaks, discount diamonds and the Real Yellow Pages.

Its message is more cryptic: "www.ContactNextOfKin.com," it says. "... it should be a law. Petition the State of Florida. In memory of our sons, Rob & Nieves."

The sign, at Goldenrod and Bates roads, is the centerpiece of an effort by two grieving mothers to change Florida law.

Debra Fountain and Judy Pardo lost sons to drug overdoses and both are furious at how the deaths were handled by the Orange County Sheriff's Office.

In each case, officials failed to notify the next of kin. In one instance, the news was delivered several hours later by a distraught 22-year-old friend of the victim. In the other, by a couple the victim's family didn't know.

"We got a phone call from total strangers saying our son was dead," said Fountain, the mother of Nieves Arambul. "Didn't the Sheriff's Office have any compassion?"

Delivering news of a death is a

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State law fuzzy on death notification

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draining but important duty. In the military, relatives are notified by soldiers in full dress uniform. With the Florida Highway Patrol, troopers take a notification class.

"You treat families the way you'd like to be treated," Trooper Kim Miller said. "You don't just blurt it out. We never leave it up to a friend or someone else."

Florida law, however, is fuzzy on the subject.

The state administrative code says the medical examiner "shall ensure" family members are told, but doesn't order examiners to actually make the notification. That's almost always handled by law enforcement.

It should have happened when Arambul and Robert Pardo died, but the cases "fell through the cracks," according to Chief Steve Jones of the Orange County Sheriff's Office.

Arambul died last December from an overdose of oxycodone and Xanax. He was 26. Pardo died from a heroin overdose two years before that. He was 23.

Even though both had identification on them, no one from the Sheriff's Office delivered the news to the family. In Pardo's case, officials left that job to the friend who found Pardo dead.

Judy Pardo says that is "completely unacceptable."

"He's just woken up to find his best friend dead," she said. "He could barely talk. You don't let a 22-year-old kid come and tell the family."

A department internal inquiry says Pardo's friend — Christopher Bayko — asked to inform the family. One detective claims he "begged" to do so.

But Bayko disputes that. He told the internal affairs investigator he never volunteered to deliver the news. He said he agreed to do so only after he was asked by a deputy.

The details of Arambul's case are still under review. It is clear, however, that the Sheriff's Office didn't tell Arambul's family about his death.

His mother and father learned when the couple he

was spending the night with — a couple they didn't know — called about three hours after Arambul's body was found. By then, the medical examiner had taken their son away for an autopsy.

When Fountain and her husband went to the home, all they found was some of Arambul's clothes and a card left by one of the deputies.

Stunned, and still hoping some horrible mistake had been made, Fountain called the deputy.

"I asked, 'Why didn't you tell me my son died?'" Fountain said. "She told me, 'I didn't know where you lived.' He didn't even have a prayer over him."

Angry at how the cases were handled, Fountain paid \$3,600 to put up the billboard on Goldenrod Road. She also created a Web site seeking support for her cause.

"We just don't want anyone else to go through this," Fountain said.

Last week, Jones acknowledged that Pardo's and Arambul's cases had been mishandled. He said agency policies require investigators and deputies to contact the family when someone dies. They are not supposed to allow someone else to make the notification.

"It should not have happened, and it better not happen again," Jones said. "It's our responsibility."

But the agency's policies could be more clearly spelled out, he said, so its manual will be rewritten to explicitly say deputies and investigators should notify next of kin.

"We'll also do some training so everyone understands just how important this is," Jones said.

Fountain and Pardo welcomed that news, but they still plan to push for legislation instructing law enforcement to make notification as soon as possible. The office of Sen. Gary Siplin, D-Orlando, already is working on that bill.

"There are procedures, but the procedures don't work," Pardo said. "That's why we need the law."

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JOHN RAOUX/ORLANDO SENTINEL

In Orlando. A billboard at Bates and Goldenrod roads invites people to petition the state to pass a law requiring authorities to notify next of kin as soon as possible after a family member dies.



DAVID ZENTZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Mourning. Judy Pardo and Debbie Fountain display Pardo's painting showing each of their deceased sons, Robert Pardo (left) and Nieves Arambul, on Tuesday.