

Your *support* network



PHOTO BY LAUGHING DOG

Diana Stone (left) and Sandra Kutchinski say being able to offer immediate support to loved ones in the aftermath of a tragedy is a rewarding aspect of a challenging job.

Exploring the role of WCB's fatality case managers

By: Jamie Hall

Ask Sandra Kutschinski what she loves about her job and she'll tell you it's being able to offer assistance to people in their darkest hour.

"I can be the one who steps in to offer immediate help to people after something happens," she says. "I can offer something positive in an otherwise tragic situation."

Sandra is a fatality case manager. Between her and her colleague Diana Stone, they handle WCB fatality claims for all of Alberta. Sandra has been with WCB for 25 years, a fatality case manager since May 2002. Diana joined her in 2009.

“The impact my job has had on me is that I remember to always live for the moment, day to day, always remembering that memories live forever in our hearts.”

– WCB fatality case manager Diana Stone

The deaths of younger workers are particularly difficult

A pass-through connects their offices—much like one you would see in someone’s kitchen—for ease of conversation and information sharing about their respective files. Each file begins with a life lost through a workplace accident.

They are all tragedies, but it’s the ones involving younger workers that haunt Sandra the most: the 16-year-old crushed to death by a vehicle on his dad’s worksite, the teen that died just days into a summer construction job.

“It’s always hard, especially when those kids were about the same age as my own kids,” says Sandra, whose children are now adults. “Maybe that’s why I’ve always been so insistent with my own kids about how careful you need to be, how aware you need to be. And I always say, you need to make sure your affairs are in order. You need to have a will. You just never know.”

Easing financial worries—improved with the new legislation

For Diana, being present has taken on new meaning since she stepped into her role as fatality case manager.

“The impact my job has had on me is that I remember to always live for the moment, day to day, always remembering that memories live

forever in our hearts,” she says.

In the direct aftermath of a workplace death, Sandra and Diana are able to alleviate a family’s financial worries when it comes to funeral expenses.

“People have questions, even in their grief,” says Sandra. “And I’m able to answer some of those questions. I’m able to tell them they don’t have to worry about sacrificing a mortgage payment to pay for the funeral, that we’ll handle that for them. I’m able to talk about the support we can offer them and the benefits they’re entitled to.”

Legislative changes enacted at the beginning of this year mean Sandra and Diana are now also able to offer families a lump-sum fatality benefit up to \$90,722.20, in addition to funeral expenses. That includes families of deceased workers who are single with no dependants.

The majority of spouses left behind are women

“Up until the beginning of this year, all we could pay for was the funeral if someone was single, which seemed tragic,” says Sandra. “Now we’re able to offer that lump sum to the next of kin.”

Those with surviving spouses and dependent children also receive additional benefits by way of a pension that is in effect until the children turn 18. Surviving spouses—most of whom are women—are also entitled to vocational benefits to help them establish careers or find better-paying jobs.

“We’ll pay for tuition, books, a computer, all the supplies, everything,” says Sandra. “I have some ladies who have taken full advantage of the vocational benefits and have gone on to accomplish wonderful things. Some

have gone on to get their master’s degrees. Others have become teachers and nurses, and are thrilled to be able to support themselves and their children.”

Always a phone call away

After a workplace death, Sandra says, she handles the funeral expenses, sets up the pension, starts the benefits and makes sure the surviving spouse knows she’s available to help. After a year, she reaches out again to see how things are going.

“There’s a lot going on after someone dies, especially under tragic circumstances,” she says. “We want to maintain contact, but we also know that some of these people are trying to raise young children. We just want them to know we’re here if they have questions.”

“When we call again to check in, we’re asking things like: Is there anything you need? How are the kids doing? Then we explain the pension again, and how it’s in effect until the kids turn 18.”

Striving to remain true to the memory of a loved one

Diana says some of the widows and widowers she has worked with have made huge strides in their lives, dealing with the adversity and coming out the other side stronger than before.

“To me, they are amongst life’s heroes,” she says, “not giving sorrow and loss permission to define them—being strong, building and strengthening themselves and their families into the future, always remembering, cherishing and staying true to the memories of their loved one.” 

“I’m able to tell them they don’t have to worry about sacrificing a mortgage payment to pay for the funeral, that we’ll handle that for them.” – WCB fatality case manager Sandra Kutschinski