



*Background: In Fall 2014, a member of a NASCO member co-op passed away unexpectedly. This document, produced by the staff of the co-op, is an anonymized account of the co-op's response to this tragedy.*

--

Dear Colleagues,

This quarter our co-operative experienced a tragedy we all hope will never happen, the death of a member. NASCO staff have asked me to author this document to help other housing co-operatives respond appropriately and promptly should a similar tragedy befall your co-ops. This happened roughly 2 weeks after move-in this year, and the member was new to the co-ops and names have been changed. Here is the time line of our response, followed by important considerations throughout the process:

#### Tuesday

After being at home for the weekend, Alex, a member of our co-op has not responded to housemate contacts and has missed his weekly chores. Members wonder where Alex is.

#### Wednesday

At 9pm, Alex's sister texts Alex's roommate, stating that Alex died the day before. A member brings this to our Board meeting and Board members and staff are shocked. Staff and Board briefly discuss an appropriate response before adjourning the meeting early. Staff immediately check in with members at the house, and stay and talk with them for a while. They want a professional counselor to be available at the house on Saturday

#### Thursday

Staff meet with university counseling, schedule two psychologists to visit the house, and are told to contact the Dean of Student Life. Staff check in again with other housemates, drop off counseling literature, and email the house with the obituary the family posted and resources for members to get in touch with (grief counseling, general psychologists, etc). Staff contact NASCO seeking resources from similar experiences in other co-ops, but there don't appear to be any at this time. NASCO provide recommendations and contact information for staff at another co-op that experienced a member death previously.

#### Friday

Staff contact university Dean of Student Life, discover that the university and Alex's family did not know

where Alex was living. Family request that we box up Alex's belongings and send them with the returned security deposit to help with funeral expenses. Staff credit Alex's security deposit and rent for Wednesday through the end of the month, and send to Alex's family. Staff schedule packing up Alex's things with Alex's roommate for Monday.

### Saturday

Two university psychologists meet with some of Alex's housemates in the living room of their house. Staff check in to make sure folks have connected, but don't participate.

### Monday

Staff check in with Alex's roommate, pack Alex's things up, and mail them to Alex's family. Staff contact our wait list notifying them that we have a vacancy and move forward filling the spot.

### Important considerations:

1. **Understand grief is natural and provide support to affected members.** A number of Alex's housemates felt like they could have prevented Alex's death, blaming themselves for not reaching out to him more, not noticing signs, or being too busy. Listening, holding no judgment, and providing compassion for these members in their grief is important for healing. Professional grief counselors were able to talk with members about these feelings.
2. **Creating listening space is essential.** Our staff have had numerous casual conversations with Alex's housemates who stop by our office to talk about how they are feeling, relay other experiences and how they relate, and assurance. We aren't professionals and we do connect our members with professionals as needed, but we can still talk about this as humans.
3. **Responding to the family promptly is important.** Alex's family's expressed their need of funds to help pay for the funeral, so we responded as promptly as possible to release all lease obligations and send the security deposit to them.
4. **Check in with the roommate specifically.** Alex's roommate was impacted most, communicated with Alex's family, and wanted to help us pack up Alex's things.
5. **Leverage ally resources.** There are many resources in university and non-university communities for everything from counseling, drug abuse, suicide prevention, etc. They responded quickly and our organizations were able to help each other serve our members and Alex's family immediately after the tragedy.
6. **Respect member agency and varying responses to grief.** Alex's housemates and our Board were conscious of not pressuring Alex's housemates with resources or counselors, so we made sure they were passive but clearly available. We have also left it up to Alex's housemates to decide whether or not to hold a vigil, create a memorial, etc.