

## **Obits and Life Stories**

### **Crafting a lead**

- Time and place of funeral services
- Time and place of burial
- Visitation time
- Survivors
- Date and place of birth
- Achievements
- Occupation
- Memberships

### **Safeguards**

- Confirm spellings of names on the mortuary form.
- Check the addresses. If a telephone book or city directory lists a different address, contact the mortuary about the discrepancy.
- Check the birth date against the age, noting whether the person's birthday was before or after the date of death.
- Verify with the mortuary or family any obituary phone or faxed to the newspaper.

- Check your newspaper's library for stories about the deceased, but be sure you don't pull stories about someone else with the same name.

## **Writing life stories**

- Ask people what was important to the deceased and what the evidence for that is.
- Capture the theme of the person's life. If family recognizes person in story—you've done well.

## **Sources of info**

- Mortuary Form:
  - Call mortuary. Clear up questions
  - Go beyond form—confirm every fact on the sheet
- Paid Funeral Notices
  - Turn funeral notice in to story
- Newspaper library
- Interviews with family and friends
  - “We write about how people lived, not about how they died.” (Kay Powell, AJC)
- Check newspaper policy (prey on survivors, cause of death, embarrassing info)

## **Tips on policy options (what your newspaper will or will not run):**

- Run an obit that ignores any embarrassing info and, if necessary, leave out the cause of death. If circumstances surrounding the death warrant a news story, run it separate from the obit.
- Insist on including embarrassing details and the cause of death in obits.
- Insist on including embarrassing details and the cause of death in the obit only for a public figure.
- Put a limit on how far back in the person's life to use derogatory information, such as a conviction.
- Print everything thought newsworthy that is learned about public figures but not about private figures.
- Print everything thought newsworthy about public and private figures.
- Decide on each case as it comes up.

## **Choosing your words**

- Avoid euphemisms; such terms are out of place in a news story.
- Watch your language as you report the cause and circumstances of the death.
- Be careful with religious terms.