

## Flags Flown at Half-Staff in Louisiana to Honor Slain Insurance Investigators

By: Marcia Passos Duffy

American and Louisiana flags flew at half-staff outside Louisiana government buildings on June 9 and 10 in a show of respect for two state insurance fraud investigators who were shot to death on June 7.

Gov. Bobby Jindal ordered the flags to be flown at half-staff in honor of Kim Sledge and Rhett Jeansonne, who had gone to the Ville Platte office of suspended insurance agent John Melvin Lavergne to collect records. Lavergne shot the investigators and then killed himself.

The two investigators were unarmed but the Louisiana Department of Insurance said it is exploring the possibility that investigators could carry guns in the future.

Louisiana Insurance Commissioner Jim Donelon said the department is committed to preventing such an incident from happening again. "First and foremost we want our investigators to be free from harm when conducting investigations," he said.

Donelon has requested that the families of Sledge and Jeansonne be eligible for both the \$250,000 stipend and the scholarship for school-age dependent children that the state makes available to families of law enforcement officers who fall in the line of duty.

While rare, shooting deaths of insurance investigators is not unknown.

"Investigators deal with people whose emotions may be volatile. The potential for violence comes with any knock on any front door, even for seemingly routine interviews simply to gather facts," said Dennis Jay, executive director of the **Coalition Against Insurance Fraud**. "Any case can lead insurance investigators into harm's path, without warning or a chance to defend themselves. No one can ever assume an insurance investigation is safe, or routine."

In May 2009, former Charlotte, N.C., insurance agent Michael A. Howell pled guilty in the 2008 death of Sallie Rohrbach, a North Carolina Department of Insurance agency examiner.

Rohrbach had been reviewing Howell's agency books for possible fraud. Howell received nearly 28 years in prison after pleading guilty to second-degree murder.

Howell also pled guilty to 25 counts of embezzlement after nine months of investigation into his Dilworth Insurance Agency in Charlotte, according to North Carolina Insurance Commissioner Wayne Goodwin.

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Each embezzlement count represents a premium payment that Howell pocketed instead of forwarding to GMAC Insurance and Discovery Insurance companies. Between March 2004 and May 2008, Howell embezzled more than \$150,000 in documented and undocumented premiums, according to officials.

Goodwin said that hundreds of the Dilworth Insurance Agency's customers were affected by Howell's actions, but that GMAC Insurance and Discovery Insurance companies "made good on every policy, so no customers lost money or insurance coverage in the end."