




ARLINGTON COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT DIRECTIVE MANUAL

Chapter: 5 Procedures	Effective Date: July 1, 2020	Amends/Supersedes: October 6, 2017 March 1, 2005	By Authority of the Chief of Police  Charles A. Penn
Accreditation Standard(s): OPR.02.01			

531.01 Preliminary Death Investigations

I. Policy

Until proven to the contrary, a death should be considered as a possible homicide. One must be constantly aware that a death incident may represent a danger to persons still at the scene or to responding personnel. The personal safety of individuals at the scene is a primary concern.

II. Definitions

Medical Examiner - A physician authorized by the Virginia Department of Health, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) to investigate violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths to bring trained medical evaluation into the investigation of those deaths which, are of concern to the public health, safety and welfare.

III. Code Requirement

- A. [Virginia Code § 32.1-283](#). Investigation of deaths; obtaining consent to removal of organs, etc.; fees.
- B. [Virginia Code § 32.1-309.3](#). Cremations and burials at sea.

IV. Procedure

- A. Preliminary Death Investigation – Officers responding to calls involving a death should not form opinions or conclusions based on dispatch information prior to arrival at the scene. Personnel should assume any call involving a death is a homicide and a medical examiner case until proven otherwise. In all cases the scene should be secured using appropriate measures and as warranted by the situation.
 - 1. Preliminary Actions - The first officer on the scene is responsible for:
 - a. Assuring the safety of persons to prevent further injury or death.
 - b. Calling for additional police or rescue assistance.
 - c. Requesting a supervisor and a police agent respond to the scene.
 - d. Preserving the scene and possible evidence.
 - e. Gathering witnesses.

2. Preliminary Investigation

- a. All deaths being investigated by the police department shall be documented in a case report.
- b. A death investigation is either a medical examiner's case or a non-medical examiner's case and the body is either in public view or is not in public view.
- c. Personnel should always proceed with their investigation and processing as if it were a homicide as procedures for the disposition of the body will vary depending upon the circumstances - could take hours or days before the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) determines whether a case is a medical examiner's case or a non-medical examiner's case.
- d. The Department shall investigate the death of any person in police custody. The investigative process will be professional, thorough, and impartial and consist of both a criminal and administrative investigation into all aspects of the incident.

B. Death Certification

1. Medical Examiner Case - The following types of death, regardless of the duration of survival following the underlying injury are considered medical examiner cases and require that the OCME be contacted and presented with the circumstances surrounding the death and any known medical history associated with the decedent. Most cases will not require the medical examiner's immediate presence at the scene of death, however; a medical examiner is required to make the appropriate determination concerning on-site viewing and the disposition of a body.
 - a. Trauma or violence: gunshot, stab, electrocution, burn, poison, fall, mangling, crushing, drowning, starvation, suffocation, strangling, etc.
 - b. Suspicious, unusual, or unnatural cause: any death suspected of being from homicide, suicide, accident, violence, trauma or injury.
 - c. In custody: in prison, jail, or police custody regardless of apparent cause.
 - d. Unexplained or unexpected: 1) Found dead under non-suspicious circumstances, but there is no reasonable medical history nor symptoms to explain the cause of death; 2) Never attended by a physician; or attended by a practitioner who is legally unable to complete death certificate; 3) Fetal death attended by a midwife.
 - e. Other: when the body is to be cremated or buried at sea.

If the medical examiner indicates an autopsy will be conducted, the body will usually be transported directly to the [OCME's Northern District Office](#) in Manassas. (See IV.C. Body Transport)

2. Non-Medical Examiner's Case

- a. A death resulting directly from a disease or illness which has been diagnosed and is actively being treated or attended to by a physician or where the patient is under the care of a medical staff of a hospital, hospice, or nursing home.
- b. The physician in charge of a patient's care for the illness or condition which resulted in death is to be contacted as soon as possible. The investigating officer shall notify the physician of the deceased's passing and determine if the physician intends to sign the death certificate. If the deceased's physician refuses to sign the death certificate, the OCME is to be notified immediately. This information shall be noted in the investigating officer's case report.
- c. If the investigating officer is unable to contact the attending physician, the officer shall contact the OCME for permission to remove the body. In all cases, officers at the scene should make certain the deceased's body bag is secure prior to being transported from the scene. The body shall then be transported to the Virginia Hospital Center to be stored in the morgue until the attending physician is contacted to sign the death certificate.
- d. When an investigating officer is unable to contact the deceased's attending physician, it shall be the responsibility of the detective assigned to the case to follow up with the physician regarding completion of the death certificate. Once the attending physician is notified and agrees to sign the death certificate the body can be released to family and moved from the hospital morgue to the funeral home.

C. Body Transport

1. Medical Examiner Case –When the Medical Examiner indicates there will be an autopsy, the body is usually transported directly to the [Medical Examiner's Northern District office](#) in Manassas. Transportation of the body to the location designated by the Medical Examiner will be accomplished by the funeral home contracted by the Department for the removal of dead bodies.
2. Non-Medical Examiner's Case - When the body is in public view, a police supervisor may request that the body be transported by a medic unit to the Virginia Hospital Center. If the body is not in public view, the selection of a funeral home is the family's responsibility. The deceased's body shall be transported directly to the funeral home using the funeral home's vehicle. If no family is available, transportation to a funeral home will be at the direction of a police supervisor utilizing the funeral home contracted by the department for the removal of a body.

A DOA Registration Information Form shall be completed by the investigating officer to record the deceased's personal information. A copy of this form shall be supplied to the registration staff at the hospital charged

with temporarily storing the body of the deceased, the security staff admitting the body of the deceased to the hospital's morgue and attached to the police case report.

3. The funeral home contracted by the department, to transport dead bodies, is reimbursed for the transport of medical examiner's cases only. The transport of a non-medical examiner's case will be at the request of a family member and may be a funeral home of their choosing. The officer assisting for the arrangement of the transport will inform the family that they are responsible for payment and document this in the case report or supplement along with the names of funeral home personnel making the transport.

D. Pronouncement and Identification

1. Virginia Hospital Center Emergency Room physicians are not required to make death pronouncements in DOA cases. The obvious death determination made by the Fire Department medics and observation by the officers' present shall be sufficient. It shall be mandatory for the investigating officer to record in the report the name(s), administrative number(s), and the assignment of the medics who respond and make obvious death determinations.
2. All bodies must be identified by attaching an evidence tag to both the body and the exterior of the body bag prior to its removal from the scene. A [Death Scene Check List](#) must be completed by the police agent assigned to the call. A separate Death Scene Check List must be prepared for each victim. The original Death Scene Check List (white) is always attached to the case report. The yellow copy of the Death Scene Check List is needed for a medical examiner's case and should accompany the body for the medical examiner's review. Additionally, the yellow copy of the Death Scene Check List should be given to hospital security personnel if a body is to be temporarily stored at the Virginia Hospital Center morgue. Otherwise, the yellow copy of the Death Scene Check List should remain attached to the original.
3. If the body is to be temporarily stored at the Virginia Hospital Center morgue, the investigating officer shall respond to the Virginia Hospital Center Emergency Room (ER) and register the body with the ER desk. During registration the investigating officer shall provide the hospital's registration staff with a photocopy of the [DOA Registration Information form](#). The officer shall then contact hospital security and request they meet the officer and funeral home personnel (or Fire Department) at the hospital morgue. The officer shall provide a copy of the Death Scene Checklist and a copy of the DOA Registration Information form to the security officer in order for the funeral home (or Fire Department) to place the body into the morgue. The officer shall then attach a copy of the DOA Registration Information form to the case report along with all other required documentation. Reviewing supervisors should confirm this form is attached to the DOA report when submitted by an officer.

E. Notification of the Criminal Investigations Section

1. The Homicide/Robbery Unit of the Criminal Investigations Section (CIS) shall be notified of all medical examiner's cases. During normal CIS duty hours, notification should be made by an Operations Division supervisor familiar with the events and the scene to the Homicide/Robbery Unit supervisor, or another CIS supervisor if the Homicide/Robbery Unit supervisor is not available. Other than normal CIS duty hours, notification should be made in the following order until a supervisor has been notified:
 - a. Lieutenant, Homicide/Robbery Unit
 - b. Captain, Criminal Investigations Section
 - c. Any Lieutenant, Criminal Investigations Division
2. After evaluating the information provided by the Operations Division supervisor, the CID supervisor will have Homicide/Robbery Unit detectives either respond to the scene to take over the investigation or follow-up after preliminary investigation case reports have been submitted. Operations Division personnel will conduct preliminary investigations where there are no unusual or suspicious circumstances.
3. If a death occurs in the Arlington County jail, the responsibility for an investigation rests concurrently with the Sheriff's Office and the Police Department. Each agency will assign an investigator to work with and assist the other in the investigation. The Sheriff's Office shall maintain the body and death scene in the condition found until inspected by a police investigator. The Police Department shall be primarily responsible for processing the scene and collecting evidence.

F. Fingerprints

1. A police agent shall fingerprint the deceased in all death cases to which the police are called. For an apparent homicide or suicide, a full rolled set of fingerprints should be taken at either the scene or a medical facility. When a homicide has occurred, or when the cause of death is unknown, palm prints should be obtained. In all other cases, a plain impression of the right index finger should be taken to guard against a mix-up in identities. The print should be taken unobtrusively, or out of view of family or friends. If there is an objection, do not take the fingerprint at the scene.
2. This single fingerprint should be rolled or pressed onto the back of a Latent Print Card (PD2020-117) with a piece of lift tape placed over top of the fingerprint for protection. The Latent Print Card shall be completed on the front with all necessary and available information and submitted to the Forensic Identification Unit so as to preserve the continuous and logical chain of evidence.
3. It should be noted that infants do not always have fingerprints that are conducive to current methods used to obtain fingerprints; therefore, footprints should be used in lieu of fingerprints.

G. Securing the Premises

1. In most cases, a friend or relative is present who can take responsibility for securing the premises. If circumstances are discovered that would cast doubt on the ability or appropriateness of such a person to care for the deceased's property, then the premises should be secured by the police until a responsible party can be found. If an apartment is involved it may be entirely appropriate for the resident manager to secure the premises and assume this responsibility.
2. The Police Department shall secure the premises (normally by having the locks re-keyed and turning the keys in to the Evidence & Inventory Management Unit when:
 - a. No one can be found who will be responsible for the property.
 - b. The death is of suspicious circumstances and it may be necessary to revisit the premises after the autopsy.
 - c. A crime has occurred, and it will be necessary to revisit the premises to conduct further searches for property or evidence.
3. When no one can be found to assume responsibility for the premises and items of significant value, which could be removed, are contained therein, (i.e., cash or jewelry) it may be necessary to turn these items in to the Evidence & Inventory Management Unit for safekeeping. If the deceased's will is found it may be given to the executor of the estate. If the executor is not present, the will should be turned in to the Evidence & Inventory Management Unit for safekeeping.