



Graham Police Department

Standard Operating Policies and Procedures

Policy 13 Death Investigations

DEPARTMENT POLICY

It shall be the policy of the Graham Police Department to respond to the scene and complete an investigation of deaths occurring within the jurisdictions of the department, and dead bodies discovered within the jurisdiction of the department, that are reported to the department by any means. Our role in these cases shall be to determine foul play, notify the appropriate agencies, and to properly conduct any necessary investigations.

PURPOSE

This procedure is designed to provide guidelines when involved in death investigations. Included in this procedure are steps the officer should follow in notifying Alamance EMS and the Medical Examiner's office.

PROCEDURES

I. General Procedures

- A. In all instances where the possibility exists that a person is injured and in need of medical attention or life signs are present, officers shall render aid to the victim and request an EMS unit and have the victim transported immediately to the hospital.
- B. The responding officer shall secure the scene, and immediately notify his immediate supervisor in any case involving the death of any person and the supervisor shall respond to the scene. The supervisor will notify the CID Supervisor and the medical examiner in accordance with general statute 130A-383 entitled "medical examiner jurisdiction" of any death apparently resulting from:
 1. An act of violence
 2. Poisoning
 3. A traffic collision
 4. Suicide or homicide
 5. Any suspicious, unusual, unnatural or unexplained circumstances, including death while in police custody.
 6. Sudden unexpected deaths not reasonably related to known previous disease.

7. Deaths without medical attendance - Contacting the medical examiner will ensure that the medical examiner can visit the death scene should he/she deem it necessary. The medical examiner's phone number shall be maintained in the communications center.

C. In order to assist the medical examiner in conclusively arriving at his/her findings, the investigating officer, when possible, should substantiate the following:

1. The identity of the deceased
2. The person who last saw the deceased alive
3. Where the deceased was found
4. What time the deceased was found and by whom
5. The personal physician for the deceased

II. Death Notification

A. The investigating officer's immediate supervisor will insure proper notification to the deceased's next of kin in accordance with Policy 54 section "Next-Of-Kin Notification". The following procedures should be utilized when notifying next- of-kin of deceased, seriously injured, or seriously ill persons.

1. The shift supervisor or his/her designee should notify next-of-kin.
2. Whenever possible, assistance should be obtained from the Clergy, Victim Advocate, a relative, or a close friend. If anyone associated with the family is inaccessible, notify the Department's Chaplain or a neighbor to accompany the officer delivering the "Next of Kin" notification.
3. The person contacted should have someone there to comfort them when possible.
4. Make every effort to make contact in person. Avoid making the notification by phone when possible.
5. Notifications should be made promptly and in a considerate manner.
6. When officers are making death notification for another agency and the family needs more information, they should be directed to contact the law enforcement agency, hospital, or medical examiner from whom the information was obtained.

III. Deaths Under Suspicious, Violent, Suicidal or Accidental Circumstances

- A. In all cases where the patrol supervisor has reason to believe a person has died by suspicious or other than "natural" circumstances, the supervisor shall notify the on-call Criminal Investigator.
- B. A Criminal Investigator will be assigned to assume the investigation of all deaths occurring under suspicious, violent, suicidal or accidental (except auto accident) circumstances.

- C. The investigating patrol officer will secure the scene and complete the initial investigative report and witness statements until the investigator arrives. Witnesses will be requested to await arrival of the investigator. The patrol officer will assist the investigator at the scene to assure continuity and completeness of the investigation.
- D. The body of the deceased will not be removed or transported to the hospital until photographs have been taken of the scene and the medical examiner has been contacted and afforded the opportunity to view the scene. If, in the opinion of the investigating officer, the continuing presence of the body at the scene provides a hazard to the safety of others or risks the integrity of any evidence associated with the body, the body may be transported to the hospital once it has been photographed, outlined or otherwise referenced.
- E. In all cases of death of a criminal nature, a person other than a member of the deceased victim's family may, and should, make the identity of the deceased if possible.

IV. Deaths Under Apparent Natural Circumstances

- A. When an investigating officer has reasonable grounds to believe a person has died due to apparent natural causes, he/she will notify the shift supervisor and the medical examiner. The shift supervisor shall respond to all scenes where someone has died. The family should be contacted to ascertain their choice of funeral homes.
- B. The investigating officer will complete his/her preliminary investigation. Final case disposition will be determined based on the medical examiner's choice to examine the body of the deceased, and the findings of such examination.
- C. Should assistance or additional follow-up be necessary from the Criminal Investigations Division, the shift supervisor will request such assistance.
- D. Personal effects of the deceased will be receipted on a Property Inventory form to a member of the immediate family. If a family member is not available, the personal effects will be receipted to the driver of the vehicle or agency that transports the body.
- E. The investigation of any death by apparent natural circumstances will be considered CAUSE PENDING until the Death Certificate is received.

V. Disposition of Deceased Property

- A. When Responsible Relatives Are Present:
 - 1. Personal property items turned over to a relative should be listed on the proper report and signed by the relative receiving custody. Record on the report the name, address, telephone number, and the relationship of the person receiving the property.
 - 2. If the deceased person is wearing ring(s), watch, or other jewelry which cannot be

recovered due to the condition of the body, record in the Offense Report that the items were with the body at the time it was removed from the scene. These items should be photographed.

3. Property such as the residence of the deceased will be secured by the investigating officer, or a member of the immediate family. Upon notification, a member of the immediate family/ Estate Executor will assume responsibility for the structure and premises.
4. Animals belonging to the deceased shall be released to a member of the immediate family/neighbor/family friend/Estate Executor.

B. When No Relatives Are Present:

1. The investigating officer will seize for probate all money, keys, and other items of value that in the officer's judgment should not be left at the scene and is not of evidentiary value. In cases where death occurs at a location other than the victim's residence, i.e. hotel/motel room, all of the victim's property present will be seized for probate. Such property shall be entered into evidence and be released to a family member/executor of the estate.
2. If the deceased person is wearing ring(s), watch or other jewelry which cannot be recovered due to the condition of the body, record in the Offense Report that the items were with the body at the time it was removed from the scene. These items should be photographed.
3. Remove from the vehicle any valuable personal property that belongs to the deceased person: Such property shall be entered into evidence and be released to a family member/executor of the estate. Other property left in the vehicle shall be inventoried and the inventory signed by the wrecker driver. Attach the inventory report to the original report and turn it in to records.
4. Property such as the residence of the deceased will be secured by the investigating officer.
5. Animals belonging to the deceased will be released to the Graham Police Department Animal Control Officer or an Alamance County Animal Control Officer/Alamance County Animal Shelter and noted on the Investigation Report.