




# City of Manassas Police Department General Duty Manual



Effective Date: 08-08-2000	<b>GENERAL ORDER</b>	Number: 06-13
Subject: Medical Examiner's Cases		
<input type="checkbox"/> New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Amends <input type="checkbox"/> Rescinds <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reviewed 03/01/2025		Reevaluation: <input type="checkbox"/> 1 yr. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 18 months <input type="checkbox"/> 24 Months
Accreditation Standards: 41.2.4	By Authority Of:  Douglas W. Keen, Chief of Police	Total Pages: 4

## PURPOSE:

To identify the criteria for the notification of the Medical Examiner and establish procedures for death investigation.

## POLICY:

Patrol officers as appropriate may investigate natural deaths, subject to the provisions of this General Order. The Investigative Services Division shall be notified of all death cases, except for fatal auto accidents, as appropriate. The Investigative Services Division investigates all Medical Examiner's cases except for fatal auto accidents, which qualified departmental members with advanced accident training should investigate. The investigating officer or detective is responsible for maintaining close contact with the Medical Examiner during the course of death investigations within their purview.

Forensic Technicians and / or Evidence Technicians should be utilized at all death scenes as appropriate.

All deaths should be considered a potential homicide until the attending physician or Medical Examiner concludes otherwise. If there is any doubt as to the cause of death in the judgment of the investigating officer, the Medical Examiner should be involved as soon as possible.

The Medical Examiner's office is responsible for determining its own jurisdiction in all death cases investigated by the Department and authorizes the release of the body of the deceased to appropriate entity.

## DISCUSSION:

The office and functions of the Office of the Medical Examiner are established pursuant to the Code of Virginia Section 32.1-277 through 32.1-288.

The Office of the Medical Examiner for the Northern Virginia region is located at 10850 Pyramid Pl. Suite 121, Manassas, Virginia 20110, telephone 703-530-2600.

## PROCEDURE:

### I. Notification Process

- A. An officer arriving at the scene of an apparent natural death should tactfully ascertain the facts surrounding the death, to include:
  1. Information as to whether or not the deceased had been ill or had a relevant medical history.
  2. Medication recently taken by the deceased.
  3. The last contact the deceased had with their physician.
  4. Complaints of illness.
  5. The last time the deceased was seen or heard alive, and by whom.
  6. Any other information necessary to establish the circumstances.

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- B. The officer should brief the Duty Supervisor. The Duty Supervisor notifies the Commander of Investigative Services or their designee with the information that is known. The ISD supervisor determines whether ISD responds.
- C. Should the officer determine that the death is natural from the information reported, and the Medical Examiner determines that the death is natural, in all probability no detective will respond to the scene. However, should there be any question in the mind of the patrol officer, it should be plainly made known to the detective that there are questionable circumstances present.
- D. For cases occurring outside of normal ISD working hours, the monthly ISD On-Call Schedule established by the Commander of Investigative Services will be utilized to identify the detective who will respond.
- E. The following notification procedure applies to death cases:
  - 1. The Duty Supervisor is notified by the Public Safety Communications Center (PSCC), and a supervisor shall respond to the scene.
  - 2. The Duty Supervisor ensures that the appropriate command staff officials are notified.
  - 3. Advanced accident investigators, if available, are notified and must respond for fatal motor vehicle accidents.
  - 4. The Medical Examiner's Office is notified by the investigating officer / detective. Upon being notified of a death, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner shall take charge of the dead body and the Chief Medical Examiner shall cause an investigation into the cause and manner of death to be made and a full report, which shall include written findings, to be prepared.
    - a. The Medical Examiner contacts the officer / detective or supervisor on the scene, by telephone or by responding to the scene, and asks questions that only those persons familiar with the scene can reasonably answer.
    - b. The Medical Examiner should be advised of the identity of next-of-kin and whether death notification has been made.
    - c. Pursuant to the Code of Virginia Section 32.1-283, the Medical Examiner takes jurisdiction over the following types of death cases:
      - (1) Homicide.
      - (2) Suicide.
      - (3) Accidental.
      - (4) Unattended.
      - (5) Suspicious. This category also includes:
        - (a) Sudden deaths.
        - (b) Deaths in police or penal custody.
        - (c) Deaths of infants less than 18 months of age that may be attributable to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
  - 6. Natural death case procedure.
    - a. Natural death cases are those that the Medical Examiner does not take jurisdiction of. See Section I.E.4.c. above.
    - b. In the event of an apparent natural death, the Medical Examiner should still be notified and the pertinent facts related, even when the family in attendance states that the deceased has been under the regular care of a physician for a medical treatment. The Medical Examiner then decides whether to take jurisdiction of the case, and directs whether the body should be released to the deceased's family.
    - c. The on-scene Supervisor or designee shall notify the attending physician, and once the physician gives assurance that they will issue a death certificate and certify that the death is due to natural causes, the Medical Examiner orders the body to be released to a local funeral home. All contact with physicians shall be documented in the incident report.
    - d. Frequently, attending physicians show great reluctance to sign death certificates, even in those cases where a major medical condition has existed and where death is undoubtedly natural. Such cases become difficult between the family, the attending physician and the Bureau of Vital Statistics in the State Health Department (located in Richmond, Virginia) to resolve.

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- (1) However, the Medical Examiner is not required to assume the case on the basis of the attending physician's refusal to sign the death certificate, or in cases where the attending physician can not be located.
  - (2) Pursuant to Code of Virginia Section 32.1-263, the last physician to provide medical care to the deceased prior to death is required to sign the attending physician portion of the death certificate.
7. The Medical Examiner may issue additional guidelines concerning criteria for cases they routinely takes jurisdiction over. These guidelines are posted and distributed within the Department as they are received.
8. Notification of next-of-kin in all Medical Examiner's cases and certain natural death cases as appropriate.
  - a. The Duty Supervisor is responsible for ensuring a timely notification of the next-of-kin of the deceased, by the appropriate staff member. Hospital personnel often fulfill this duty when they become involved with the custody of the body, but may require coordination with appropriate police agencies.
  - b. Death notifications should be carried out promptly in a considerate manner, and consistent with public information procedures. See General Order 01-16.
  - c. The name of the deceased is not authorized for public release until reasonable efforts have been made to notify the next-of-kin.
  - d. This procedure also applies to death notification requests initiated by other law enforcement agencies. Only bona fide law enforcement agencies are authorized to make this request, which should be made via teletype message. Callers claiming to be doctors, hospital personnel or other officials should be referred to the local police department in order to transmit a next-of-kin notification.
  - e. This notification procedure may apply at the discretion of the Duty Supervisor for next-of-kin notification of seriously injured / ill persons.
  - f. Next-of-kin notification requests must be made in person, unless extenuating circumstances dictate otherwise.

## **II. Death Scene Management**

- A. Any death scene must be initially treated as a homicide scene. Never assume that because the deceased is elderly or the body lacks visible signs of trauma that the death resulted from natural causes. See Section I.E. above.
- B. Cause of death is a determination made by the Medical Examiner or attending physician only.
- C. The death scene must be protected and all relevant evidence collected in accordance with current crime scene, evidence and search and seizure directives. If it is determined by the Medical Examiner or by the attending physician willing to sign the death certificate that the death is natural, crime scene procedures cease, and the case is closed.
- D. Removal of the body.
  1. The body of the deceased must remain undisturbed until the Medical Examiner's Office determines jurisdiction of the case.
  2. Upon the Medical Examiner's determination that the death was natural, the Medical Examiner orders the release of the body. The body may then be picked up and transported by a funeral home.
  3. In the event that the Medical Examiner takes jurisdiction of the case, the body of the deceased should not be moved from the death scene until the Medical Examiner so directs. This notification should be made by a detective or the Duty Supervisor, as appropriate.
  4. All medication prescribed to the deceased and found at the death scene must be cataloged and put into a supplement. A Prescription Medication Document Worksheet (see Attachment "E") can be utilized and turned over to the assigned detective. All medication shall be placed into property and evidence.
  5. The Medical Examiner normally provides specific instructions for the removal of the body in Medical Examiner's cases.

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- E. All death cases investigated by the Department necessitate the completion of the Death Scene Checklist (see Attachment "A"), and the Unattended Death Identification tag as appropriate (see Attachment "D").
- F. Additionally, the Childhood Death Form / Crib Examination Sheet (see Attachment "C") must be completed on all death cases of persons up to eighteen (18) years of age.
- G. Death Scene Checklist procedure.
  - 1. The Death Scene Checklist is completed by the Evidence Technician or primary officer / detective.
  - 2. It provides the Medical Examiner with basic information about the deceased, the next-of-kin, attending physician, a description of the death scene, various items of evidence relevant to the death, and police and medical response to the scene.
  - 3. In cases where the Medical Examiner orders an autopsy of the deceased, a copy of the Death Scene Checklist is transported to the location specified by the Medical Examiner along with the body.
  - 4. The Evidence Technician or primary officer will provide the original copy of the Death Scene Checklist to the Investigative Services Division's Administrative Assistant who will scan and maintain the original checklist. The assigned detective will place the original copy of the Death Scene Checklist into the case file after it is scanned by the Administrative Assistant.
  - 5. The IBR is also completed as appropriate. See General Order 06-03.
- H. The Unattended Death Identification tag.
  - 1. The Unattended Death Identification tag is completed and prominently affixed to the body (on a toe, finger or hand) by the Evidence Technician or primary officer / detective. A second Unattended Death Identification tag is completed and affixed to the body bag appropriately identifying the deceased within. This tag should accompany a zip tie (with a serial number) securing the zippers of the body bag. These tags are affixed to the body bag located in the evidence room.
  - 2. It contains the following basic information:
    - a. The date and time of death.
    - b. The name of the deceased.
    - c. The deceased's home address.
    - d. The location where the body was found, if different from the home address.
    - e. The deceased's race.
    - f. The deceased's date of birth.
    - g. The deceased's age.
    - h. The name of the investigating officer / detective.
    - i. The IBR number.
    - j. The transport of the deceased.
    - k. The name of the Medical Examiner.

### III. Autopsy

- A. The investigating officer / detective is responsible for contacting the Medical Examiner's Office and coordinating any needed police presence at the autopsy.
  - 1. The investigating officer / detective will attend the autopsy unless directed otherwise by the Medical Examiner.
  - 2. The original copy of the Death Scene Checklist should be brought to the autopsy.
- B. The Medical Examiner may request police assistance for the collection of physical evidence, postmortem fingerprints, or to provide first hand information concerning the death scene.
- C. Crime scene photographs shall be made available to the Medical examiner at the time of autopsy.
- D. Only staff from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner may take photographs of decedents during examination at the OCME.
  - 1. Law Enforcement shall be present during an examination and can specify photographs taken of the decedent. In these cases, the law enforcement agency may discuss with the pathologist the specific photographs they would like taken.

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Attachments:    “A” Death Scene Checklist.  
                       ”B” Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Investigation  
                       ”C” Childhood Death Form / Crib Identification Sheet.  
                       ”D” Unattended Death Identification Tags  
                       ”E” Prescription Medication Documentation Worksheet

Index as:         Medical Examiner.  
                       Medical Examiner Cases.

References:      The Code of Virginia Section [32.1-277](#) through [32.1-286](#)