



OPERATIONAL MANUAL

OPS - 425 – DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

Amends/Supersedes: OPS-425 (02/06/2023)

Date of Issue: 04/28/2025

I. GENERAL

- A. When a report of a deceased person is received, uniformed patrol officers, a patrol supervisor, and an ambulance shall respond. Upon arrival at the scene of a reported death, the officers must determine if the death appears to be from natural causes, accidental, or by violent or suspicious means.
- B. A physician or qualified medical technician (ambulance/rescue personnel) makes the actual determination of death.

II. PROCEDURES

A. Death by Apparent Natural Causes

If death appears to be from natural causes, the officers shall follow the below-listed guidelines:

1. Notify the next of kin as soon as possible (see [OPS-530 Emergency Notifications and Messages](#)); [55.2.6]
2. Obtain all available information concerning the deceased, including any past medical history and attending physician, if any.
3. Brief the attending physician concerning the death. If the attending physician is unavailable, contact the Medical Examiner's Office. [41.2.4]
4. Upon authorization from the attending physician or medical examiner (they must agree to sign the death certificate), arrange for the removal of the body utilizing the funeral home requested by the family.
5. Officers will use the [Natural Death Worksheet \(NNPD Form #84\)](#) on-scene to ensure all necessary information is collected for the IBR. To ensure the Homicide Unit receives the information in a timely manner, officers will scan and email the worksheet to Homicide Unit by the end of their shift.
6. If natural death occurs in a public place, cover or conceal the body from public view pending authorization for removal by the medical examiner. Once authorized, the removal shall be made as quickly as possible.
7. Officers will complete an incident-based report utilizing the deceased person template/narrative.

B. Notification of Funeral Home / Body Removal Services

1. The on-call body removal service will be notified in all medical examiner cases or cases when the decedent's family is unknown or cannot be contacted.
2. In all other cases, the decedent's family or next of kin **must** select a funeral home.
3. The Communications Division will maintain a list of participating body removal services and, when requested, will contact the next available service on the list.

C. Death by Violence, Suicide, Illegal Drug Overdose, Accidental or Suspicious Nature (all Unnatural Deaths)

1. If a person dies by any of the above circumstances, the responding officers will make their preliminary investigation, secure the scene from all unnecessary personnel/traffic, notify a supervisor to respond, make any arrests, if indicated, separate and detain witnesses, and notify the on-call Major Crimes Division (MCD) supervisor. [42.2.1(b,c)]
 - a. The responding officers will brief the supervisor and homicide investigators upon their arrival.
 - b. The supervisor is responsible for notifying the Assistant Chief of Investigations.



2. Once the scene is secured, an officer will be assigned to keep a log of all personnel entering the scene, time of stay, the reason for entry and time of exit, continue to note their observations thoroughly, spontaneous statements received, and evidence observed (not collected, unless failure to do so would result in the loss of same). The officers on the scene must be prepared to brief the investigators upon arrival. [42.2.1(a,c)]
3. The responding investigators are responsible for ensuring all statements from any witnesses are taken. [42.2.1(d)]
4. In the event of an illegal drug overdose death, the MCD investigator will notify the Special Investigations Division (SID) for purposes of information exchange. A SID investigator will investigate the illegal narcotics portion of the investigation. All pertinent information will be shared with the Real-Time Crime Center.

D. Occupational Fatalities

1. Reports of occupational fatalities or catastrophes, including occupational fatalities involving police officers, shall be reported to the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry (DOLI), Occupational Safety Enforcement Division. If unable to contact the DOLI or OSHA directly, notify the State Police duty sergeant.
2. The reporting officer will provide the date, time, exact location of the accident, and their name and phone number as an incident reporter.
3. The fatality scene shall be preserved to the extent possible pending the arrival of the Occupational Safety Enforcement Division (usually within two hours of being notified).
4. The on-duty patrol supervisor will ensure these requirements are met.

E. Investigation of Hospice Deaths Occurring Outside the Medical Facility

1. Local hospice programs use sound philosophy in allowing and encouraging dignified deaths of the terminally ill. Intrusion by police officials to investigate routine hospice deaths can be considered apathetic by the grieving family.
2. In hospice death cases where the patient dies outside a medical facility, the attending nurse will typically notify the decedent's physician of the death. The physician will then sign the death certificate, and the family will notify the funeral home to remove the body. The procedure is done outside any police intervention.
3. Local funeral homes have been requested to evaluate the scene to divert later concerns from family members as an alternative to police involvement in hospice death investigations. The funeral homes have agreed to report any suspicious observations or suggestions of death by criminal causes to the Police Department, who shall investigate the death as otherwise outlined in this policy.


F. Determining Medical Examiner's Cases [41.2.4]

Officers and investigators will use the following criteria to determine if the Medical Examiner's Office needs to be notified.

1. Death by violence, unusual or unnatural manner (accident, suicide, homicide from physical, mechanical, chemical, electrical, thermal, or related means).
2. Death by suspicious manner, where the officer is unable to determine from the evidence whether death may be from accidental, suicidal, or homicidal causes.
3. The death occurred without medical attention in the following instances:
 - a. Found dead without obvious cause.
 - b. Unattended at any time by a licensed physician.
 - c. Unattended by a physician during a terminal illness, particularly if such illness appears to be a disease previously diagnosed and treated.



- d. A midwife attended stillbirth.
4. The sudden death of a person in apparent good health in the following situations:
 - a. Apparent instantaneous death without obvious cause.
 - b. Death during or following unexplained unconsciousness or coma.
 - c. Death during an acute, unexplained fatal illness.
5. Non-violent death within 24 hours after hospital admission is not necessarily a Medical Examiner's case. If the probable anatomical cause of death indicates natural causes, the Medical Examiner's investigation is unnecessary. However, all deaths following injury are reportable to the Medical Examiner's Office.
6. The on-duty supervisors shall contact the Major Crimes Division commander or designee in questionable cases.
7. At the time of notification, the investigating officer or Forensic Services Unit member will provide the Medical Examiner with the following information, if it is known:
 - a. The subject's name, address, date of birth, social security number, and occupation.
 - b. The address where the subject died.
 - c. When and where the subject was found and by whom.
 - d. When and where the subject was last seen alive and by whom.
 - e. The subject's activities before they died.
 - f. Medical information about the subject, including history, recent complaints, medications, etc.
 - g. The funeral home that was selected; and
 - h. The name and contact information for the next-of-kin.
- G. Organ/Tissue Procurement
 1. The Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has signed a memorandum of understanding with organ/tissue procurement agencies licensed to operate within the Commonwealth of Virginia. This relationship was established and strengthened in accordance with [§§32.1-291.1 through 32.1-291.25](#) of the Code of Virginia, which provides a mechanism by which individuals or their family members may donate organs, tissues, and eyes for transplant or research.
 2. The Tidewater Office of the Chief Medical Examiner staff usually acts as an intermediary for the Lions Medical Eye Bank and Life Net Tissue Recovery. The Medical Examiner's Officer will obtain the deceased's name, personal information, and next-of-kin information from officers. However, there may be occasions (evenings, weekends, and holidays) when investigating officers may be approached directly by representatives from these agencies for this information following local medical examiner approval.
 3. In such instances, the regional administrator for the Tidewater Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has been designated to act as the department's liaison with these organ/tissue procurement representatives. The Medical Examiner's Office staff may be reached at any time at their office number.


Steven R. Drew
Chief of Police