

Death Investigation

328.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for situations where officers initially respond to and investigate the circumstances of a deceased person.

Some causes of death may not be readily apparent and some cases differ substantially from what they appear to be initially. The thoroughness of death investigations and use of appropriate resources and evidence gathering techniques is critical.

328.2 POLICY

It is the policy of the Olympia Police Department to respond, document, and investigate incidents where a person is deceased. Investigations involving the death of a person, including those from natural causes, accidents, workplace incidents, suicide, and homicide, shall be initiated, conducted, and properly documented. This includes when an officer is called to investigate any criminally caused, suspicious or unattended death (not in the direct care of a physician, emergency medical technician or registered nurse).

328.3 INVESTIGATION CONSIDERATIONS

Emergency medical services shall be called in all suspected death cases unless death is obvious (e.g., decapitated, decomposed).

A supervisor shall be notified as soon as possible to assist and provide appropriate personnel and resources. The on-scene supervisor should determine whether follow-up investigation is required and notify the Detective Sergeant as necessary. The Shift Sergeant will make notification to command staff in accordance with the Major Incident Notification Policy.

328.3.1 CORONER JURISDICTION OVER REMAINS

The Coroner has jurisdiction of bodies of all deceased persons who come to their death suddenly in any of the following cases (RCW 68.50.010):

- (a) When in apparent good health without medical attendance within the thirty-six hours preceding death.
- (b) Where the circumstances of death indicate death was caused by unnatural or unlawful means.
- (c) Where death occurs under suspicious circumstances.
- (d) Where a Coroner's autopsy or postmortem or Coroner's inquest is to be held.
- (e) Where death results from unknown or obscure causes.
- (f) Where death occurs within one year following an accident.
- (g) Where the death is caused by any violence whatsoever.
- (h) Where death results from a known or suspected abortion; whether self-induced or otherwise.

Death Investigation

- (i) Where death apparently results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation, or smothering.
- (j) Where death is due to premature birth or still birth.
- (k) Where death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease which may be a public health hazard.
- (l) Where death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge, or sodomy.
- (m) Where death occurs in a jail or prison.
- (n) Where a body is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends.

The body or human remains shall not be disturbed or moved from the position or place of death without permission of the Coroner (RCW 68.50.050).

328.3.2 REPORTING

All incidents involving a death that OPD responds to shall be documented in the appropriate system. Reports shall be written for all unattended deaths (not in the direct care of a physician, emergency medical technician or registered nurse). CAD notes may be used to document an attended death that is not suspicious in nature.

328.3.3 SUSPECTED HOMICIDE

If the initially assigned officer suspects that the death involves a homicide or other suspicious circumstances, the officer shall take steps to protect the scene. The Investigation Unit shall be notified to determine the possible need for an investigator to respond to the scene.

If the on-scene supervisor, through consultation with the Shift Sergeant or Investigation Unit supervisor, is unable to determine the manner of death, the investigation shall proceed as though it is a homicide.

The investigator assigned to investigate a homicide or death that occurred under suspicious circumstances may, with the approval of the investigator's supervisor, request the Coroner to conduct physical examinations and tests, and to provide a report.

328.3.4 INDIGENOUS PERSONS

Upon knowledge that the remains are of an indigenous person, the Coroner, in cooperations with law enforcement, shall attempt to identify and contact, as soon as practicable, family members and any affected tribes, tribal organizations, and communities prior to removal or disturbance of the remains, except where deemed necessary by the Coroner and officers in the interest of safety or to preserve evidence for any ongoing criminal investigation. Efforts shall include attempts to facilitate contact through the regional liaison for missing and murdered indigenous persons pursuant to RCW 43.43.874 within 10 days of the Coroner having jurisdiction over the remains (RCW 68.50.325).

The Coroner and the lead investigator must provide the family member or representative of a list that contains any prohibited conduct when interacting with the remains including an explanation of

Olympia Police Department

OPERATIONS POLICY MANUAL

Death Investigation

why the conduct is prohibited. Additionally, any practices or ceremonies related to the remains by the family or representative require proper authorization by the Coroner and the lead investigator while the remains are under the jurisdiction of the Coroner (RCW 68.50.325).

328.3.5 EMPLOYMENT-RELATED DEATHS OR INJURIES

Any member of this department who responds to and determines that a death, serious illness, or serious injury has occurred as a result of an accident at or in connection with the victim's employment should request a copy of the report be sent to the regional Washington Division of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH).