POLICY AND PROCEDURE NO. 535

Deceased Persons

Massachusetts Police Accreditation Standards:
55.2.6

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1. PURPOSE:

The purpose of this policy is to establish procedures for the Worcester Police Department's response to incidents involving deceased persons, including the discovery of dead bodies, unattended deaths, and deaths requiring investigation. This policy provides guidance on scene management, medical examiner notification, evidence preservation, next-of-kin notification, and coordination with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the District Attorney's Office.

2. POLICY:

It is the policy of the Worcester Police Department to respond to all reports involving deceased persons promptly and professionally. Officers shall protect and preserve the scene, ensure proper notification of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner as required by M.G.L. c. 38, and cooperate fully with the medical examiner and the District Attorney's Office. The determination of the cause and manner of death is the exclusive responsibility of the medical examiner. Officers shall not render a determination as to the cause or manner of death but shall document observations and circumstances to assist the medical examiner in making that determination.

3. SCOPE:

This policy applies to all sworn personnel of the Worcester Police Department. This policy governs the conduct and responsibilities of Department personnel responding to scenes involving deceased persons. Dispatch and communications center procedures are governed by the Department of Emergency Communications, a separate city agency; this policy addresses only Department personnel responsibilities.

4. DEFINITIONS:

A. Attended Death

A death occurring in the presence of, or under the active care of, a licensed physician, hospice provider, or other medical professional, where the cause of death is known and not suspicious.

B. Unattended Death

A death occurring without the presence of a physician or medical professional, regardless of whether the death appears natural.

C. Suspicious Death

Any death in which the circumstances, physical evidence, witness statements, or condition of the body suggest the possibility of criminal conduct, foul play, or other circumstances requiring investigation beyond routine documentation.

D. Medical Examiner

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) or the designated regional medical examiner with jurisdiction over the determination of cause and manner of death pursuant to M.G.L. c. 38.

E. Obvious Signs of Death

Conditions indicating that resuscitation is not appropriate, including rigor mortis, lividity, decomposition, decapitation, severing of the body, or injuries plainly incompatible with life.

5. INITIAL RESPONSE:

A. Scene Safety

Upon arrival at a scene involving a potentially deceased person, the responding officer shall ensure scene safety, including assessment for hazardous materials, biohazard conditions, fentanyl or other synthetic opioid exposure, and structural hazards. Officers shall utilize appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) before entering contaminated environments.

B. Life-Saving Measures

If there is any indication that the person may be alive, the officer shall immediately initiate life-saving measures consistent with training and request emergency medical services. Officers are not required to initiate resuscitation when obvious signs of death are present.

C. Body-Worn Cameras

Officers shall activate body-worn cameras upon arrival at the scene in accordance with Policy 403 (Body-Worn Cameras).

6. SCENE SECURITY AND PRESERVATION:

Until the cause and manner of death are determined, all death scenes shall be treated as potential crime scenes. The first arriving officers shall secure the scene and establish a perimeter appropriate to the circumstances. Officers shall preserve the scene by preventing unauthorized entry, prohibiting the movement or disturbance of the body or any items in the immediate area, and documenting the identities of all persons present at or near the scene upon arrival.

When possible, without disturbing the scene, officers should take note of conditions such as the position and condition of the body, environmental conditions such as temperature, lighting, and odors. When possible, without disturbing the scene, officers should take note of any items of investigative value such as prescription medications, drug paraphernalia, weapons, suicide

notes, electronic devices, and any other items relevant to the circumstances of death. Officers shall document these observations and relay their observations to the assigned Detective Bureau investigators and Crime Scene Unit detectives.

7. SUPERVISOR AND DETECTIVE BUREAU NOTIFICATION:

A. Patrol Supervisor

The responding officer shall immediately notify a patrol supervisor. The patrol supervisor shall respond to the scene and assume responsibility for managing the incident. The patrol supervisor shall evaluate the circumstances and determine whether to request a Detective Bureau response.

B. On-Call Detective

When Detective Bureau personnel are not on duty, the on-call detective shall be notified through established procedures. The on-call roster shall be maintained and furnished to the Service Division.

8. MEDICAL EXAMINER NOTIFICATION:

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 38, Section 3 requires notification of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for any death occurring under specified circumstances, including but not limited to: deaths involving criminal violence; accidental or unintentional injury; suicide; suspicious or unusual circumstances; deaths in custody or correctional facilities; deaths involving suspected abuse of a child, elder, or disabled person; deaths related to drug or alcohol use; deaths of persons under 18 years of age; skeletal remains; deaths associated with diagnostic or therapeutic procedures; sudden death when the decedent was in apparent good health; and any person found dead.

The patrol supervisor shall ensure that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is notified promptly. On-scene emergency medical personnel may initiate this notification. If neither the medical examiner nor the OCME headquarters office can be contacted, the supervisor or a representative of the District Attorney's Office may authorize transfer of the body to the Regional Medical Examiner's Office or to a funeral home in accordance with M.G.L. c. 38.

For attended natural deaths where a physician is present and can certify the cause of death, the patrol supervisor shall confirm that the medical examiner has been notified and shall be guided by the medical examiner's instructions regarding disposition of the body.

All communications and information concerning the death shall be relayed to the medical examiner, including the names and contact information of all known witnesses, in accordance with M.G.L. c. 38.

9. DEATH CIRCUMSTANCES AND RESPONSE:

Officers shall document the apparent circumstances of death to assist the medical examiner. The following categories describe the general circumstances officers may observe; however, the official determination of cause and manner of death is made solely by the medical examiner.

A. Apparent Natural Death (Attended)

A physician or hospice provider is present, the death is expected, and no suspicious circumstances exist. The responding officer shall document the scene, confirm medical examiner notification, and complete a written report.

The responding officer should remain with the body until it is removed by authorized removal personnel — a funeral home or the medical examiner's designated transport — as directed by the medical examiner. A patrol supervisor may authorize release of the scene before removal when a responsible adult assumes custody of the body and premises or when an exigent operational need requires the officer elsewhere; the release and its basis shall be documented.

B. Apparent Natural Death (Unattended)

No physician is present. The patrol supervisor shall respond, ensure medical examiner notification, and evaluate whether Detective Bureau response is warranted. Officers shall document the scene, including any medications, medical devices, and medical history information available at the scene.

The responding officer should remain with the body until it is removed by authorized removal personnel — a funeral home or the medical examiner's designated transport — as directed by the medical examiner. A patrol supervisor may authorize release of the scene before removal when a responsible adult assumes custody of the body and premises or when an exigent operational need requires the officer elsewhere; the release and its basis shall be documented.

C. Apparent Accidental Death

Includes falls, drownings, fires, industrial accidents, and overdoses. The patrol supervisor shall notify the Detective Bureau. The Crime Scene Unit shall respond for scene documentation. For suspected drug overdoses, officers shall document the presence of drug paraphernalia and any naloxone administration by first responders, and shall be aware of the protections afforded to reporting persons under the Good Samaritan provisions of M.G.L. c. 94C, § 34A.

D. Apparent Suicide

The patrol supervisor shall notify the Detective Bureau. The Crime Scene Unit shall respond for scene documentation. Officers shall preserve any notes, electronic communications, or other materials that may be relevant to the circumstances.

E. Apparent Homicide or Suspicious Death

The patrol supervisor shall immediately notify the Commanding Officer and the Detective Bureau. The Detective Bureau shall assume investigative responsibility upon arrival. Officers shall preserve the crime scene, identify and separate witnesses, and refrain from discussing the circumstances with non-law enforcement personnel. The District Attorney's Office shall be notified.

F. Detective Bureau Response

The Detective Bureau is responsible for the investigation of all deaths classified as homicide, suicide, accidental, or any death where the circumstances warrant further investigation. Detective Bureau personnel shall respond to the scene when requested and conduct a thorough investigation, including witness interviews, evidence collection, and coordination with the medical examiner and the District Attorney's Office.

G. Preliminary Investigation Steps

Detective Bureau personnel shall conduct the preliminary investigation in accordance with Policy 503 (Criminal Investigations), which establishes the required preliminary investigation steps. Personnel shall document all investigative actions taken at the scene in the case file.

10. CRIME SCENE UNIT AND DIGITAL EVIDENCE:

A. Crime Scene Unit Response

The Crime Scene Unit shall respond to all death scenes involving homicide, suicide, accidental death, and any unattended or suspicious death where the patrol supervisor or Detective Bureau requests scene documentation. Crime scene personnel shall photograph and document the scene, collect physical evidence, and prepare a written report documenting actions taken at the scene, evidence recovered, and the disposition of all physical evidence.

B. Digital and Electronic Evidence

At death scenes involving homicide, suicide, accidental death, or any suspicious death, officers shall identify and preserve any digital or electronic evidence at the scene, including cellular phones, computers, tablets, smart home devices, security cameras, and social media accounts. Officers shall not access, search, or manipulate the contents of any electronic device without proper legal authority, consistent with Riley v. California (2014). Electronic devices in the immediate area of the body should be secured and documented for potential seizure pursuant to a search warrant. Extraction and analysis of data from any seized electronic device shall be performed only by personnel who have received training in data forensics and who are familiar with the legal requirements governing the seizure and examination of electronic evidence.

11. HANDLING OF THE DECEASED:

A. Movement of the Body

A deceased person shall not be moved except at the direction of the medical examiner or the District Attorney's Office. Limited exceptions exist where movement is operationally necessary, including a body recovered from water that may be moved to the nearest suitable location, and a body creating an active traffic hazard following a motor vehicle accident that may be relocated to a nearby suitable site. Before any body is moved, its position shall be documented through photographs, measurements, and detailed written notes.

B. Shielding the Body from Public View

A deceased person shall not be covered with a sheet, tarp, or other material. Each application or removal of a covering creates the risk of disturbing, transferring, or losing trace evidence, fibers, biological material, and other items of evidentiary value. The body shall remain in place and undisturbed until the medical examiner or the District Attorney's Office directs otherwise.

When a body is in a public location, officers shall shield the body from public view by establishing a perimeter at sufficient distance to prevent observation, by positioning marked cruisers, fire apparatus, or other vehicles to create a visual barrier, or by requesting a tent or screening structure for prolonged scenes. The patrol supervisor shall determine the most appropriate combination of these measures based on the location, available resources, and anticipated duration of the scene. When these measures are unavailable or insufficient to shield

the body from public view, the body may be covered only at the direction of the Crime Scene Unit or the Detective Bureau, using clean materials selected to minimize disturbance of evidence. The covering and the basis for it shall be documented.

C. Coordination with Fire and EMS

Officers on scene shall communicate to responding fire department and emergency medical services personnel that the body is not to be covered. If fire or EMS personnel have already covered the body prior to police arrival, officers shall document the action in their written report and consult with the Detective Bureau or Crime Scene Unit before any covering is removed.

12. SPECIAL DEATH CIRCUMSTANCES:

A. Infant and Child Deaths

All deaths of persons under 18 years of age require notification of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner regardless of apparent cause. Officers responding to an infant death shall be aware of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and Sudden Unexplained Infant Death (SUID) protocols. The scene shall be documented in detail, including the sleep environment, bedding, and position in which the infant was found.

When a child death involves suspected abuse or neglect, the officer shall immediately notify the Department of Children and Families (DCF) pursuant to mandatory reporting obligations under M.G.L. c. 119, § 51A, in addition to the medical examiner and the Detective Bureau.

B. Overdose and Drug-Related Deaths

Officers responding to suspected drug overdose deaths shall exercise appropriate caution regarding potential fentanyl or other synthetic opioid exposure. Officers shall utilize PPE and avoid direct contact with unknown substances. The scene shall be documented and all drug paraphernalia, packaging, and substances preserved as evidence.

Officers shall be aware of the Good Samaritan protections under M.G.L. c. 94C, § 34A, which provide limited immunity from prosecution for persons who seek medical assistance for someone experiencing a drug-related overdose. This provision does not restrict officers from conducting a death investigation.

C. Decomposition and Biohazard Scenes

Scenes involving advanced decomposition or biohazard conditions require additional precautions. Officers shall not enter such scenes without appropriate PPE. The patrol supervisor shall consider requesting specialized resources, including hazardous materials response, as appropriate. Following recovery of the body and completion of the investigation, the property owner or responsible party should be advised regarding professional biohazard remediation services.

13. IDENTIFICATION OF THE DECEASED:

Officers shall make diligent efforts to identify the deceased using available information at the scene, including identification documents, personal effects, medical alert devices, and information provided by witnesses or family members.

The discovery of any unidentified deceased person shall be reported to CJIS and entered into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) within 24 hours. The case shall also be entered into the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) within 30 days or as soon as practicable. Unidentified remains shall be cross-referenced against the Department's missing-persons records; the matching of unidentified remains to missing-persons reports is addressed in Policy 570 (Missing Persons).

14. NEXT-OF-KIN NOTIFICATION:

A diligent effort shall be made to identify and notify the next of kin as soon as practicable. Death notifications should be made in person by at least two officers whenever possible. Officers making death notifications should be prepared to provide the next of kin with basic information about the circumstances, the location of the body, and contact information for the medical examiner's office and victim services.

If the next of kin cannot be located, the Detective Bureau shall be notified to conduct follow-up efforts. The identity of the deceased shall not be released to the media or public until the next of kin has been notified, consistent with Policy 305 (Media Relations).

For homicide cases and other violent deaths, a member of the Detective Bureau may request that the District Attorney's Office assist the family by providing access to a victim/witness advocate.

The Department shall also make next-of-kin notifications in circumstances other than death. When the Department becomes aware that a person has been seriously injured or has become seriously ill and the next of kin is not present or already aware, officers shall make a diligent effort to notify the next of kin as soon as practicable, using the in-person notification practices described above whenever feasible. When another law enforcement agency requests that the Department locate and notify a next of kin, including a request received through CJIS or NCIC such as an attempt-to-locate or administrative message, the Department shall make a diligent effort to locate and notify the next of kin and shall advise the requesting agency of the result. MPAC 55.2.6

15. PROPERTY AND PREMISES SECURITY:

A. Property and Valuables

When property of significant value is discovered at the scene and cannot be adequately secured within the residence or premises, such property shall be taken into custody for safekeeping in accordance with Policy 410 (Property and Evidence Control). All items taken for safekeeping shall be documented, photographed, and logged. Any next of kin taking possession of such property shall sign for and acknowledge receipt of all items.

B. Premises Security

Upon completion of the scene investigation, officers shall take reasonable steps to secure the premises, including closing and locking doors and windows where practicable. Where the responding officer is remaining with the body under Section 9, the premises shall be secured in conjunction with the body's removal. If the premises cannot be adequately secured, the patrol supervisor shall arrange for appropriate measures, which may include contacting a property owner, landlord, or maintenance personnel.

C. Animals and Pets

Officers shall make a reasonable effort to determine whether any animals or pets are present at the scene. If animals are present, officers shall take reasonable steps to ensure their wellbeing and shall make appropriate notifications to Animal Control when necessary.

16. DEATHS IN CUSTODY:

Any death occurring while a person is in the custody of the Worcester Police Department, including deaths in the holding facility, during transport, or while otherwise under the Department's control, shall be treated as a critical incident. The patrol supervisor shall immediately notify the Commanding Officer, the Detective Bureau, and the Chief of Police or designee. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and the District Attorney's Office shall be notified immediately. All body-worn camera footage and other recordings shall be preserved. The response to and investigation of a death in custody is governed by Policy 501 (Officer-Involved Shootings, In-Custody Deaths, and Serious Uses of Force).

17. SEARCH AUTHORITY:

Officers conducting searches at death scenes shall comply with all constitutional requirements. A limited search of the premises may be conducted under exigent circumstances or with consent to locate identification, medications, and other information relevant to the immediate circumstances of death. Any search beyond this limited scope requires a search warrant or other recognized legal authority. Officers shall document the legal basis for any search conducted.

Per:

Paul B. Saucier
Chief of Police

Revisions:

July 27, 2026–

Complete rewrite of Policy 535 (last issued October 23, 2015) and conversion to the Department's current policy template for MPAC accreditation compliance. The verbatim M.G.L. c. 38 § 3 statutory text was replaced with a summary and citation, and the policy clarifies that the determination of the cause and manner of death rests solely with the medical examiner. Substantive additions since the prior policy include scene safety and PPE requirements addressing fentanyl and biohazard exposure; scene security and preservation; body-worn camera activation; a prohibition on covering the body, subject to a narrow exception permitting a covering only at the direction of the Crime Scene Unit or Detective Bureau when other measures are unavailable or insufficient, with use of cruisers, apparatus, perimeter, and screening to shield it from public view; digital and electronic evidence handling consistent with Riley v. California; infant and child death protocols (SIDS/SUID and DCF reporting under M.G.L. c. 119 § 51A); overdose-death procedures with the Good Samaritan reference; decomposition and biohazard procedures; deaths-in-custody procedures; a search-authority framework; property and premises security; and NCIC and NamUs entry for unidentified deceased persons. Added a requirement that the responding officer remain with the body at apparent natural death scenes until removal by authorized removal personnel as directed by the medical examiner, subject to release of the scene by a patrol supervisor. Next-of-kin notification was expanded to cover deceased persons, the seriously injured or ill, and notifications requested by another agency. Signing authority was updated.

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