

Police Procedures Guide for Investigating Hospice Death

Note: *Please utilize the following guide in accordance with your departmental policy and procedures.*

When the death is anticipated and appears natural. The primary goal is to determine if the death is truly from natural causes related to the terminal illness, or if there are any suspicious circumstances that warrant further investigation.

I. Initial Response and Assessment (First Responding Officer):

1. **Safety First:** The first officer on scene will ensure the safety of the environment, checking for any immediate dangers to themselves or others.
2. **Evaluate the Scene:** The officer will observe the scene for any signs of violence, struggle, forced entry, or other suspicious activity.
3. **Life Saving Measures (if applicable):** If there is any doubt about the person's death, or if the individual is not obviously deceased (e.g., rigor mortis, decomposition), emergency medical services (EMS) will be summoned to confirm death and attempt resuscitation if appropriate.
4. **Confirmation of Death:** Once confirmed deceased, the officer will clear the room of all family members and friends and set up a crime scene perimeter.
5. **Inspection of the Body** - The officer will then put on gloves and other required biohazard dressings before inspecting the body for signs of foul play. The officer will conduct a thorough external examination of the body, including documenting the presence of injuries, bruises, or other signs of trauma.
6. **Gather Preliminary Information:**
 - **Manner of Death:** Is it an apparently natural death, or are there any indicators of accident, suicide, or homicide?
 - **Medical History:** Is there a known history of serious natural ailments or a terminal illness?
 - **Hospice Care:** Confirm if the deceased was under hospice care and for what reason.
 - **Attending Physician:** Identify the attending physician who was responsible for the deceased's care.
 - **Medications:** Note any medications present at the scene.

- **Timeline:** Ascertain the timeline leading up to the death, including when the deceased was last seen alive and by whom.
- **Witnesses:** Identify and gather basic information from any witnesses present (family, hospice staff, etc.).
- **Condition of the Body:** Document the initial appearance and condition of the body.

II. Consultation and Notification:

1. **Contact Attending Physician:** In cases of anticipated death under hospice care with no suspicious circumstances, the attending physician will be contacted. The physician is typically expected to respond to the scene to formally pronounce the death and, if satisfied, sign the death certificate.
2. **Medical Examiner/Coroner Notification:**
 - **General Rule:** If the death is clearly anticipated due to a terminal illness and the attending physician is willing and able to certify the cause of death as natural, a full medical examiner investigation or autopsy may not be required.

When Medical Examiner/Coroner IS Notified: Police will typically notify the medical examiner or coroner in the following situations:

- **Suspicious or Unnatural Death:** Any indication of violence, trauma, drug overdose (illicit or prescription), accident, suicide, or homicide.
- **Sudden Death without Obvious Cause:** If the person dies suddenly when in apparent good health.
- **Unattended by Physician:** If the person dies without having been attended by a duly licensed and practicing physician who can certify the cause of death.
- **Physician Uncertainty:** If the attending physician is uncertain about the cause of death or unwilling to sign the death certificate.
- **Deaths in Custody or Certain Institutions:** Deaths in prison, jail, or other specific institutional settings often require reporting.
- **Unidentified Body:** If the body is found and unidentified, or the circumstances of death are unknown.
- **Specific Jurisdictional Requirements:** Some jurisdictions have specific requirements (e.g., Texas requires notification of

the Medical Examiner/Justice of the Peace for deaths of children under 6, even if on hospice).

- **Medical Examiner's Role:** If the medical examiner assumes jurisdiction, they will conduct their own investigation to determine the cause and manner of death, which may include an autopsy if deemed necessary. They will also collect medical and social history.

III. Documentation and Reporting:

1. **Detailed Report:** The responding officer will complete a comprehensive incident report, including:
 - Facts supporting the manner of death.
 - Medical history and medications.
 - Timeline of events leading to death.
 - Identity and contact information for the deceased, family, and hospice staff.
 - Description and condition of the body and scene.
 - Details of pronouncement of death and physician's information.
 - Any suspicious circumstances, if observed.
2. **Next of Kin Notification:** Police are often responsible for or assist in notifying the legal next of kin. This is done with sensitivity and compassion, and they will provide relevant contact information for law enforcement and the medical examiner (if involved).
3. **Property Management:** Safeguard the deceased's personal property at the scene.

IV. Coordination with Other Agencies:

- **Hospice Staff:** Police will coordinate with hospice nurses and staff to obtain information regarding the patient's condition, care plan, and the circumstances leading to the death. Hospice organizations often prepare families for the police investigation of an apparent sudden death and can provide prepared information to the officers.
- **Funeral Home:** Once the death is pronounced and the body is released (either by the physician or medical examiner), police may assist the family in arranging for the removal of the body by a funeral home.

- **Medical Examiner/Coroner:** Close collaboration with the medical examiner or coroner's office is crucial, particularly if there are any doubts about the cause or manner of death.

Key Considerations for Hospice Deaths:

- **Anticipated Nature:** Police recognize that hospice deaths are generally anticipated due to terminal illness. This significantly influences the nature of the investigation.
- **Minimizing Intrusion:** Law enforcement aims to minimize intrusion into the grieving family's space when the death is clearly natural.
- **Suspicion Triggers:** The primary focus for police in a hospice death is to identify any *"red flags"* that would elevate it from a natural death to one requiring a more in-depth criminal investigation (e.g., signs of abuse, neglect, unexplained injuries, or conflicting information).