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DEATH INVESTIGATION: A Guide for the Scene Investigator



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Acknowledgments

NIJ wishes to thank the most recent Medicolegal Death Investigation Technical Working Group for Death Investigation (MDIWG). This working group gave of their time to review guideline content, providing the professional feedback from a national perspective. In addition, the offices that employ each member of the group share in this endeavor. Through their support, each member was given the flexibility they needed to support the project. NIJ also wishes to thank the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for funding this update. Most notably, we want to thank Dr. Margaret Warner, director of the Collaborating Office of Medical Examiners and Coroners (COMEC), for being a co-chair of this working group and helping to create and instill the vision for a new version of the guide.

The former director of NIJ, Dr. John Laub, had the foresight to see the need for a technical update to this guide; he approved and convened a committee to perform a technical update to the guidelines. Similarly, in 2019, another former NIJ director, Dr. David Muhlhausen, approved a similar committee to again review and create another technical update. This group was constructed from members of the three most critical professional organizations overseeing death investigation: the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigation (ABMDI), the National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME), and the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME). Other federal agencies with a role in death investigation also participated, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

NIJ also thanks Senior Physical Scientist Charles Heurich, co-chair NIJ, and Mallory O'Brien, Ph.D. Associate Scientist, Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins University for their assistance in the technical update.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nancy La Vigne', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

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Introduction to the 2024 Technical Update

Medicolegal death investigation has evolved greatly in the years since the 2011 release of the first technical update to *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*. A few of these changes are advances in communication, photography, and documentation technology; procedural advances in drug, child, and infant death investigations; and an elevated awareness of the importance of the medicolegal death investigator (MDI) among professional partners, families, and the media. With the ever-changing advances in DNA technology, the MDI must also possess an increased understanding of the potential value of evidence associated with the body. Lastly, it has become clear with regard to death investigations that the MDI must be allowed to perform an independent, yet collaborative, investigation with law enforcement. This model ensures the best possible outcome for both death and criminal investigations.

This revised and updated edition is the result of a collaborative effort to present the most up-to-date information about the issues confronting MDIs today.

A multidisciplinary group was brought together for reviewing and bringing the content up to contemporary standards. The group was broken into section groups, each with a chair and co-chair. Once the section groups finished their edited sections, the document was combined, and comments were collected. A final editorial group met in person in Washington D.C. for a final review session followed by two subsequent virtual meetings. ABMDI, IACME, and NAME were all represented.

Death investigators are the foundation of a medicolegal death investigation and make crucial decisions about the involvement of not only the office, but also of a forensic pathologist, in which case they are the eyes and ears of that forensic pathologist at the scene.

The introductions to the 2011 technical update and the original guide describe the study that focused on the establishment of guidelines for conducting medicolegal death investigations. For a complete history of this guide, review the introductions to the 2011 update and the original guide from 1999 at <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/234457.pdf>.

Authorization

The medicolegal death investigator (MDI) is responsible for investigating deaths that fall under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner or coroner. The authorization to perform the duties outlined in this guide may vary based on official medical examiner/coroner office policies, procedures, statutes, ordinances, and regulations.

Section A: Initial Notification and Determination of Response

This section discusses initial notification of death. The initial notification of death may come from a variety of community partners, including law enforcement, emergency medical services, or healthcare providers. Whenever possible, community engagement regarding agency procedures for reportable deaths to the agency should be carried out. Both retained and released deaths should be reviewed by the agency coroner and/or medical examiner, or other specially trained personnel (which in some jurisdictions may include justices of the peace). This section's content is organized into four areas: 1) Document Initial Death Report, 2) Retain or Release Medicolegal Jurisdiction, 3) Determine Scene Response, and 4) Prepare and Collaborate.

The MDI should communicate with the MDI authority or designee (e.g., coroner, medical examiner, forensic pathologist) about responding to the scene and/or to determine if an autopsy is indicated, as outlined within agency procedures.

1. Document Initial Death Report

Principle: Upon notification of a death, MDIs should document relevant information about the death.

Policy: The MDI should maintain documentation on any death for which they receive notification.

Procedure: Upon receiving initial notification of a death, the MDI should record (at minimum) the following information:

- A. Reporting agency information.
- B. Reporting individual's name and call-back phone number.
- C. Associated law enforcement case number and/or hospital medical record number.
- D. Decedent demographics, including name, date of birth, age, race, ethnicity, and biological sex and/or gender.

- E. Details about suspected cause and manner of death.
- F. Summary of terminal events and reported medical history.
- G. Apparent scene safety or security concerns.

Summary: Gathering and documenting accurate information is critical to the start of an investigation. There are times when the initial reporter may have to be contacted again.

2. Retain or Release Medicolegal Jurisdiction

Principle: Upon notification of a death, the MDI has the responsibility for triaging the decision on whether medicolegal jurisdiction is released or retained and documenting the rationale.

Policy: The MDI should decide jurisdiction and document the rationale for retaining or releasing jurisdiction over any death for which they receive notification. All deaths and MDI rationale for jurisdiction decision should be reviewed by the agency coroner and/or medical examiner.

Procedure: Upon receiving notification of a death, the MDI should:

- A. Obtain additional information necessary to determine whether the death should remain under medicolegal authority. This information may be collected during the initial death report call or through subsequent follow up. Medicolegal jurisdictions are based on state law and internal office policies and procedures. Generally, they include (at a minimum):
 - a. Suspected or apparent homicide.
 - b. Suspected or apparent suicide.
 - c. Suspected or apparent accident.
 - d. Skeletal remains.
 - e. Unnatural or unexpected infant/child deaths.
 - f. Death occurring while in police custody.

- g. Apparent natural death with no primary care provider to sign the death certificate.
- B. Release the case from medicolegal jurisdiction if a reported death has a clearly documented natural cause of death, a person authorized to sign the death certificate in the state is willing to sign the death certificate, and there is no history of recent or remote trauma; no concerns for abuse, neglect, or foul play; and no concern for substance misuse or acute toxicity (drugs or alcohol). In such instances, the MDI should:
- a. Document the criteria used to qualify the case as not requiring medicolegal jurisdiction.
 - b. Record the name of the individual and agency to whom the release was issued.
 - c. Have the agency coroner and/or medical examiner, or other specially trained personnel, review and approve the MDI notes and rationale for releasing jurisdiction.

Summary: It is essential to collect all of the necessary information to determine jurisdiction. Enough information should be documented to provide justification for the determination of jurisdiction.

3. Determine Scene Response

Principle: Upon accepting jurisdiction of a case, the MDI has the responsibility for determining whether to respond to the associated scene(s) based upon agency policy and procedures.

Policy: The MDI should make determination of scene response based upon agency policy and procedures and document the rationale. If medicolegal jurisdiction is retained, the scene(s) should be examined directly by MDIs whenever possible.

Procedure: Upon taking medicolegal jurisdiction of a death, the MDI should promptly determine whether a scene response is possible.

- A. Whenever possible, the MDI should respond to the scene.
- B. If the MDI is unable to examine the scene in person, they should document the time at which they gave permission for the body to

be moved as well as the individual and agency to whom they gave this permission. They should ensure that photos and/or videos are obtained by the partnering investigative agencies.

Summary: MDI scene response is always preferred. However, there may be extenuating circumstances where scene response by the MDI is not possible. In situations where the MDI is not able to respond, it is critical to make sure the responding agency obtains the necessary documentation and photographs.

For additional guidance, see “[Medicolegal Death Investigation Response to Death Locations and Incident Scenes: Best Practice Recommendations, OSAC 2022-N-0027](#),” produced by the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science, which is managed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

4. Prepare and Collaborate

Principle: Upon accepting jurisdiction of a death, the MDI has the responsibility to ensure other appropriate agencies are notified of the death and prepare for a safe, effective, and coordinated response to the scene.

Policy: The MDI should promptly seek and share any information with appropriate agencies that may improve scene safety and/or effectiveness.

Procedure: The following procedures will assist MDIs in contributing to a collaborative and effective scene response.

- A. **Preparation:** MDIs should request information about the state of the scene and body prior to response. This information may include:
 - a. Recommended travel routes.
 - b. Other notified or responding agencies (e.g., HAZMAT or OSHA).
 - c. Known scene hazards (e.g., weather, weapons, environment, and animals).
 - d. Known physical or chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or explosive (CBRNE) hazards.

- e. Apparent postmortem interval/state of decomposition.
 - f. Special handling details (e.g., equipment, tools, or personnel).
 - g. Estimate of response time based on current scene and responder status.
- B. **Collaboration:** MDIs should ensure timely direct notification of the death to other appropriate parties so that a response may be coordinated. Ancillary parties may include, but are not limited to, law enforcement, district attorneys/prosecutors, public health officials, crime lab personnel, forensic pathologists, anthropologists, body transport services, funeral homes, emergency management, and organ and tissue procurement agencies.

Summary: Preparation and collaboration are the basis of a coordinated and safe scene response and investigative process for all responders. Knowledge of security risks and obstacles at a scene prior to arrival is critical.

Section B: Arriving at the Scene

This section will discuss arriving at the scene. No scene is the same, and processes may vary in how information is captured. However, whenever possible the MDI should organize and preplan their approach. This section's content is organized into seven areas (in no particular order): 1) Introduce and Identify Self and Role, 2) Exercise Scene Safety and Security, 3) Confirm or Pronounce Death, 4) Participate in Scene Briefing, 5) Conduct Scene Walkthrough, 6) Establish Chain of Custody, and 7) Follow Laws and Statutes Related to the Collection of Evidence.

1. Introduce and Identify Self and Role

Principle: Introductions at the scene allow the MDI to establish formal contact with other official agency representatives. The MDI must work with all key people to ensure command protocol and scene safety prior to their entrance into the scene.

Policy: The MDI shall take the initiative to introduce themselves; identify essential personnel, witnesses, and family members; establish rapport; and determine scene safety and security.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene and prior to entering the scene, the MDI should:

- A. Identify the lead law enforcement official at the scene and present government- or agency-issued credentials.
- B. Identify other essential officials and family/friends at the scene and explain the MDI's role in the investigation.
- C. Identify and document the identity of the first responding official(s) to the scene to ascertain if any artifacts or contamination may have been introduced or items removed from the scene.

Summary: Introductions at the scene help to establish a collaborative investigative effort. It is necessary to carry identification in the event of questioned authority and essential to establish scene safety and security prior to entry.

2. Exercise Scene Safety and Security

Principle: Awareness of scene safety and security for all investigative personnel, including the MDI, is essential and must be continuously monitored throughout the duration of the scene investigative process. The risk of environmental and physical injury must be removed prior to initiating a scene investigation. Risks can include, but are not limited to, hostile crowds; collapsing structures; traffic; fire; and environmental factors, such as chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive (CBRNE) threats.

Policy: To prevent injury or loss of life, the MDI shall attempt to establish scene safety and security prior to entering the scene, including contacting appropriate agencies for assistance with other scene safety and security issues.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the MDI should:

- A. Park and secure their vehicle in a safe and accessible location that does not obstruct scene entry/exit.
- B. Identify incident command, if applicable.
- C. Assess and/or establish physical boundaries.
- D. Log in (and out) with scene security personnel.
- E. Identify and/or reserve parking for the transport vehicle as needed.
- F. Use personal protective safety equipment and devices (physical, biohazard safety), when appropriate.
- G. Identify appropriate agency and arrange for removal and security of pets/animals (if present and possible).
- H. Obtain clearance/authorization to enter the scene from the individual responsible for security/scene safety.
- I. While exercising scene safety and security, protect the integrity of the scene and evidence from contamination or loss by people, animals, and elements (to the extent possible).
- J. Document any actions taken to protect the scene and evidence.

Note: Due to potential scene hazards, the body may have to be removed before scene investigation can be continued.

Summary: Environmental and physical threats to the MDI must be removed in order to safely conduct a scene investigation. Protective devices/equipment must be used by MDI staff to prevent injury when possible. The MDI must endeavor to protect the evidence against contamination or loss.

3. Confirm or Pronounce Death

Principle: Authorized personnel must make a determination of death prior to the initiation of the death investigation. The confirmation or pronouncement of death initiates jurisdictional responsibilities.

Policy: The MDI shall ensure that authorized personnel have confirmed and/or pronounced death.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the MDI should:

- A. Locate, view, and examine the body.
- B. Check for pulse, respiration, and reflexes, as appropriate.
- C. Identify and document the individual who made the official determination of death, including the date, time, and location of determination.
- D. Ensure death is pronounced and/or confirmed as required.

Summary: Once death has been determined, medicolegal jurisdiction can be established. It is vital that death is established prior to the medical examiner/coroner assuming any responsibilities.

4. Participate in Scene Briefing

Principle: MDIs responding to the scene must recognize the varying jurisdictional and statutory responsibilities that apply to other response agencies. Determining each agency's responsibility at the scene is essential in planning the scope and depth of investigation and coordinating the dissemination of pertinent information.

Policy: The MDI shall communicate specific responsibilities and requests, share pertinent information, establish agency objectives, and discuss the appropriate use of recording devices.

Procedure: When participating in scene briefing, the MDI should:

- A. Locate the various operational areas of the scene.
- B. Document the scene location consistent with other agencies, using GPS coordinates when indicated.
- C. Determine the nature and scope of investigation by obtaining preliminary investigative details.
- D. Confirm initial information and determine if new information has been obtained.
- E. Discuss the appropriate use of recording devices during the investigative process.

Summary: Scene briefing facilitates the initial exchange of information. This includes scene geographical location, time, safety concerns, initial witness information, agency responsibilities, and investigative strategy.

5. Conduct Scene Walkthrough

Principle: A scene walkthrough provides the MDI with an overview of the scene. It provides the first opportunity to view the body; identify potential and transient evidence; reassess safety concerns; and determine plans for documenting the scene, preserving and collecting evidence, and recovering the body.

Policy: The MDI shall conduct a scene walkthrough with investigating agency representatives to establish pertinent scene parameters, including documentation, preservation, and recovery of the body and evidence.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene, the MDI should:

- A. Reassess scene perimeter and coordinate with law enforcement to adjust as appropriate.

- B. Evaluate existing paths of entry and exit, establishing alternate pathways as needed.
- C. Identify potential and transient evidence.
- D. Document and photograph transient evidence immediately and ensure collection, if appropriate.
- E. Locate and view the body.

Summary: The initial scene walkthrough is essential to minimize scene disturbance and to prevent the loss and/or contamination of potential and transient evidence.

6. Establish Chain of Custody

Principle: Ensuring the integrity of the evidence and personal effects by establishing and maintaining a chain of custody is vital to an investigation. This will safeguard against subsequent allegations of tampering, theft, planting, contamination, and loss of evidence.

Policy: Evidence and personal effects must be documented prior to collection. The custodian(s) shall be designated and shall generate and maintain a chain of custody for all items collected.

Procedure: Throughout the scene investigation, those responsible for preserving the chain of custody should:

- A. Document the location of the scene and MDI's time of arrival at the scene.
- B. Determine and document custodian(s) of evidence, determine which agency (or agencies) is responsible for collection of specific types of evidence, and determine evidence collection priority for transient evidence.
- C. Identify, document, secure, and preserve evidence with proper containers, labels, and preservatives.

- D. Document the collection of evidence by recording its location at the scene, time of collection, and time and location of disposition and by whom.
- E. Document and inventory personal effects, if appropriate.

Summary: It is essential to maintain a proper chain of custody for evidence and personal effects. Through proper documentation, collection, and preservation, the integrity of the items can be assured. A properly maintained chain of custody will reduce the likelihood of a challenge to the integrity of the evidence.

7. Follow Laws and Statutes Related to the Collection of Evidence

Principle: The MDI must follow local, state, and federal laws and statutes for the collection of evidence to ensure its admissibility for legal proceedings. The MDI must work with law enforcement and other legal authorities to determine proper collection of evidence.

Policy: The MDI must identify and work under appropriate legal authority with due consideration of the statutory responsibilities of other investigative agencies. Modification of informal procedures may be necessary, but laws must always be followed.

Procedure: Prior to or upon arrival at the scene, the MDI should work with other agencies to:

- A. Discuss local, state, and federal laws and statutes; international laws; and best practices.
- B. Ensure medicolegal death investigation statutes and office policies and procedures do not interfere with statutory obligations of another agency.
- C. Discuss foundational expectations for notification, scene response, evidence collection, and body handling/transport.
- D. Discuss the need for a search warrant and the impact on scene protocols, specifically MDI response and scene access.

Summary: Following laws and best practices related to the collection of evidence will support an investigation in maintaining compliance with state and local laws, admissibility in court, and adherence to office policies and procedures.

Section C: Documenting and Evaluating the Scene

This section discusses arriving at the scene. The content is organized into five areas: 1) Photograph Scene, 2) Develop Descriptive Documentation of the Scene, 3) Establish Probable Location of Injury or Illness, 4) Collect, Inventory, and Safeguard Property and Evidence, and 5) Interview Witness(es) at the Scene. Scenes can be complex and processing them might not always be linear. Certain steps might need to be repeated or processed out of the usual sequence.

1. Photograph Scene

Principle: The photographic documentation of the scene (which may include video) creates a permanent historical record of the scene as it was observed.

Policy: The MDI shall obtain clear and accurate photographic documentation of the scene.

Procedure: Prior to moving the body or evidence, the MDI should:

- A. Attempt to minimize extraneous individuals and investigative equipment from the scene photographs.
- B. Take overall photographs of the scene from multiple perspectives to spatially orient the scene within the surrounding area. This gives context to specific areas that will be photographed more closely. Photographs providing an elevated or aerial view can be valuable in large, complex, or distributed scenes, especially with mass fatalities.
- C. Photograph specific areas of the scene to provide more detailed (close-up) views of important areas within the larger scene. All detailed views should be shown in at least one overall photograph.
- D. Photograph the important findings in the scene from different angles to provide various perspectives.

- E. Take photographs with scales to document specific evidence.
- F. Take photographs even if the body or other evidence has been moved.

Note: If evidence has been moved prior to photography, it should be noted in the report. But the body or other evidence should not be reintroduced into the scene to take photographs.

Summary: Photography allows for the best permanent documentation of the scene. It is essential that accurate scene photographs are available for pathologists, other investigators, agencies, and authorities to recreate the scene. Photographs are a permanent record of the scene and retain evidentiary value and authenticity. It is essential that the investigator obtains accurate photographs before leaving the scene.

2. Develop Descriptive Documentation of the Scene

Principle: Written documentation of the scene provides a permanent record of observations that can be used to correlate with and enhance photographic documentation and refresh recollections. Additional documentation may be used when it enhances understanding of what occurred.

Policy: MDIs shall provide written documentation of observations of the scene.

Procedure: After photographic documentation of the scene and prior to removal of the body or other evidence, the investigator should describe:

- A. Body location, position, and appearance.
- B. Items of evidence and their relationship to the body, with measurements to clarify important findings, if necessary.
- C. Blood and body fluid evidence — including estimated volume, patterns, and other characteristics — with measurements, if they would improve understanding.
- D. Scene environments, including odors, lights, temperatures, and other fragile or transient evidence.

Note: Scene documentation should include the broad overview (i.e., house, apartment building, or outside location) and immediate vicinity of the body. If scene conditions have changed or evidence has been moved prior to written documentation, it should be noted in the report.

Summary: Written scene documentation is essential to correlate with photographic evidence and to re-create the scene.

3. Establish Probable Location of Injury or Illness

Principle: The location of the body might not be the location where the injury/illness occurred or where the death occurred. It is imperative that the investigator attempt to determine the locations of any and all events that may have contributed to the death. Physical evidence at all locations might be pertinent in establishing the cause, manner, and circumstances of death. This investigative element might have to be established in conjunction with later interviews and/or records for delayed deaths. Any recent locations should be considered for their investigative and/or evidentiary value.

Policy: The MDI shall obtain detailed information regarding any and all probable locations associated with the individual's death and visit the locations with investigative and/or evidentiary value when possible.

Procedure: The MDI should:

- A. Document the geographical location where death occurred (if known) and where the body was found — which may include GPS coordinates.
- B. Document the geographical location(s) of where the injury or other contributing events occurred, if known.
- C. Document geographical location(s) where the MDI performed their investigation. Determine the location from which the body was transported and how the body was transported to the scene, if possible.

- D. Identify and record discrepancies between the body and the scene (e.g., rigor mortis, livor mortis, or body temperature).
- E. Check the body, clothing, and scene for consistency/inconsistency of trace evidence and indicate the location where artifacts are found.
- F. Check for drag marks or other indicators (both on the body and the ground) of the body having been moved.
- G. Document activity after injury, if known.
- H. Obtain information from first responders, including police, emergency medical service, fire, and other personnel, as appropriate to the case.
- I. Interview family members, witnesses, and associates as needed.

Summary: A body might be moved from the actual location of illness/injury due to survival after injury, multiple modes of transportation, the availability of specialized care, or criminal activity. It is imperative that the investigator attempt to determine any and all locations where the decedent has previously been that might be related to the death and or injury/illness and the mode of transport from these sites.

4. Collect, Inventory, and Safeguard Property and Evidence

Principle: The decedent's valuables/property must be safeguarded to ensure proper processing and eventual return to next of kin. Evidence on or near the body must be safeguarded to ensure its availability for further evaluation. Personal property must be safeguarded to ensure its eventual distribution to appropriate agencies or individuals.

Policy: The MDI shall ensure that all property and evidence are collected, inventoried, safeguarded, and released as required by office policies and procedures.

Procedure: After personal property and evidence have been identified at the scene, the MDI or law enforcement agency personnel (depending on policy) should inventory, collect, and safeguard the following (at both the scene and office):

- A. Illicit drugs and paraphernalia.
- B. Decedent's prescription medications. Follow local agency procedures for prescription medications not prescribed to the decedent. For all prescription medications, document the date, dose, prescriber, pharmacy, amount issued, and amount remaining. Utilize drug identification guides as needed.
- C. Relevant over-the-counter medications.
- D. Money, personal valuables, and property.
- E. Physical evidence related to the death (e.g., firearms, weapons, notes, or ligatures).

The MDI or law enforcement agency personnel should also determine whether medication contents match labeling using drug identification guides as needed.

Note: The MDI must take caution when inventorying, collecting, and safeguarding property and other evidence due to the potential for exposure to constantly evolving and unknown hazards of illicit narcotics and sharp objects.

Summary: Personal property and evidence are important items at a death investigation. Evidence must be safeguarded to ensure its availability if needed for future evaluation and litigation.

5. Interview Witness(es) at the Scene

Principle: The MDI can obtain primary source data regarding discovery of the body and terminal history by documenting comments of witnesses or those present at time of death, family members or associates at the scene, or anyone with relevant information. The documented interview provides essential information for the investigative process. This can be done in tandem with the information to be obtained in Section F of this document if the witness(es) is/are able to provide additional information.

Policy: The MDI's report should include the source of information, contact information for the witness(es), and specific statements and information provided by the witness(es).

Procedure: To obtain primary source data about the event and history, upon arriving at the scene the investigator should:

- A. Collect and document all available identifying information on witness(es) and/or potential witness(es) (e.g., full name, address, date of birth, and contact information).
- B. Establish and document the relationship/association between the witness(es) and the decedent.
- C. Establish and document the basis of witness knowledge (e.g., how does the witness have knowledge of the death?).
- D. Obtain and document each witness individually or collectively as appropriate.
- E. Document any discrepancies among witness statements, scene briefings, and scene examinations. Notify appropriate agencies about any discrepancies that exist.

Summary: Effective witness interviews can provide a permanent record that supplements and clarifies investigative findings. Discrepancies revealed during these interviews may refocus the investigation.

Section D: Documenting and Evaluating the Body

This section discusses documenting the body both in relationship to surroundings and external examination findings (including postmortem changes). It also summarizes collection and preservation of evidence found on the body. However, collaborating with individual crime laboratories may offer additional guidance. The section closes with guidance on scene debriefing and establishing and notifying the legal next of kin. The content is organized into eight areas: 1) Photograph the Body, 2) Conduct External Body Examination, 3) Preserve Evidence (on Body), 4) Establish Decedent Identification, 5) Document and Assess Postmortem Changes, 6) Participate in Scene Debriefing, 7) Determine Notification Procedures (Next of Kin or Interested and Authorized Individuals), and 8) Ensure Security of Remains.

1. Photograph the Body

Principle: The photographic documentation of the body at the scene creates a permanent record that preserves essential details of the decedent's position, appearance, and identity.

Policy: The MDI shall take clear, accurate, and detailed photographs of the body.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene and prior to moving the body or evidence, the MDI should:

- A. Photograph the body and immediate surroundings as initially found by the MDI.
- B. Photograph the body front and back.
- C. Photograph the decedent's face as found (do not change condition). Subsequent actions should follow office policy.
- D. Take additional photographs after removal of items that interfere with photographic documentation of the body (e.g., bedding, infant completely covered by a blanket). In addition, take photographs of the body after removal of these items.

- E. Photograph the body with and without measurements, as appropriate.
- F. Photograph the surface beneath the body after the body has been removed.

Summary: The photographic documentation of the body at the scene provides for documentation of the body position, identity, and appearance. The details of the body at the scene provide investigators with pertinent information for further evaluation.

2. Conduct External Body Examination

Principle: Conducting the external body examination provides the MDI with objective data regarding a vital piece of evidence at the scene: the body. This documentation provides detailed information regarding the decedent's physical attributes; their relationship to the scene; and possible cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Policy: The MDI shall conduct an external body examination; take clear, accurate, and detailed photographs; and compile written documentation of the body at the scene.

Procedure: After arrival at the scene and prior to moving the body, the MDI should, without removing the decedent's clothing (see note):

- A. Document and photograph the decedent's position with and without measurements, as appropriate.
- B. Document and photograph the presence, absence, and condition of clothing and personal effects, including any that may have been removed by emergency responders or law enforcement prior to arrival of the MDI.
- C. Document the presence of foreign items/objects.
- D. Document and photograph the decedent's physical characteristics and the presence of potential identifying features, such as missing appendages, birthmarks, scars, tattoos, piercings, surgical incisions, and other forms of body modification.

- E. Document and photograph the presence or absence of injury/trauma.
- F. Document and photograph the presence of treatment or resuscitative efforts.
- G. Based on the findings, determine the need for further evaluation/ assistance of forensic specialists or technologies (e.g., forensic pathologists, odontologists, or alternate light sources).

Note: A thorough external body examination includes head-to-toe palpation. However, preservation of evidence must be prioritized. In addition, while clothing should not be removed, it is crucial to look at the skin and body underneath the clothing to examine all external aspects of the decedent.

Summary: Thorough evaluation and documentation (photographic and written) of the decedent at the scene is essential to determine the depth and direction the investigation will take to determine the cause and manner of death. Some physical findings may only be revealed through palpation and not through visual assessment alone (e.g., fractures, crepitus, and masses).

3. Preserve Evidence (on Body)

Principle: The photographic and written documentation of evidence on the body allows the investigator to create a permanent historical record of that evidence. To maintain chain of custody, evidence — including clothing — must be properly recognized, documented, collected, preserved, and transported. In addition to all the physical evidence visible on the body, blood and other body fluids present must be photographed and documented prior to collection and transport. Fragile or transient evidence (which can be easily contaminated, lost, or altered) must also be collected and preserved to maintain chain of custody and to assist in the determination of cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

Policy: With photographic and written documentation, the MDI will create a permanent record of evidence that is on the body.

Procedure: Once evidence on the body is recognized, the MDI should:

- A. Photograph the evidence.
- B. Document blood/body fluid on the body (e.g., froth/purge or substances from orifices), location, and pattern before moving the body.
- C. Secure decedent's hands and feet in evidence-quality or paper bags as determined appropriate for the circumstances.
- D. Identify and ensure collection or protection of trace evidence before transporting the body (e.g., blood, hair, or fibers).
- E. Understand that the decedent's clothing may also be evidence and should be collected in coordination with law enforcement and in accordance with local practice and agreement with the forensic pathologist.
- F. Arrange for the collection and transport of evidence found on the body, including medications, drugs, needles, and ligatures (when necessary and as indicated by agency policy and procedure).
- G. Ensure the collection of blood and body fluids as needed for subsequent analysis. This includes ensuring any antemortem specimens or samples are secured promptly (e.g., those drawn by emergency medical services [EMS], hospital, or tissue/organ procurement staff).

Summary: It is essential that evidence be collected, preserved, transported, and documented to ensure the chain of custody and admissibility in a legal action. The preservation and documentation of the evidence on the body must be initiated by the MDI at the scene to prevent alterations or contamination. In some instances, identification of trace evidence may require alternative methods (e.g., alternate light source or presumptive testing).

4. Establish Decedent Identification

Principle: The establishment or confirmation of the decedent's identity is paramount to the death investigation. Proper identification allows notification of next of kin, settlement of estates, resolution of criminal and civil litigation, and the proper completion of the death certificate.

Policy: The MDI shall engage in a diligent effort to establish/confirm the decedent's identity.

Procedure: To establish identity, the MDI should document use of the following methods:

- A. Direct visual or photographic identification of the decedent, if visually recognizable. When authorized, a face may be cleaned to allow for identification after the initial photographic documentation is completed.
- B. Scientific methods, **which are preferred**, include but are not limited to fingerprint, dental, radiographic, and/or DNA comparisons.
- C. Circumstantial methods include but are not limited to personal effects, circumstances, physical characteristics, tattoos, and anthropologic data. Available technologies should be used to assist in decedent identification (e.g., NamUs [<https://namus.nij.ojp.gov>] or the National Crime Information Center). This may include digital fingerprinting or radiographic imaging.

Summary: There are several available methods that can be used to properly identify decedents. In some cases, the MDI should employ more than one method to confirm the identity of decedents. An autopsy along with examination and authentication of recovered medical devices (such as pacemakers and orthopedic devices with serial numbers) may also be used to confirm identification. This is essential for investigative, judicial, family, and vital records purposes.

5. Document and Assess Postmortem Changes

Principle: Postmortem changes of the body, when correlated with circumstantial information, can assist in estimating the approximate time and physical and geographical location of death. Inconsistencies between postmortem changes and the body's physical and geographical location may indicate movement of the body after death and validate or invalidate witness statements.

Policy: The MDI shall document all postmortem changes.

Procedure: Upon arrival at the scene and prior to moving the body, the MDI should document and assess the presence of each of the following in their report:

- A. Livor (e.g., color, location, blanchability, Tardieu spots).
- B. Rigor (e.g., stage/intensity, presence within anatomical locations assessed [jaw, neck, upper/lower extremities], broken, inconsistent with the scene or body position).
- C. Algor (e.g., warm, cold, frozen) or measurement of body temperature (document method used and time of measurement).
- D. Degree of decomposition (e.g., putrefaction, adipocere, mummification, skeletonization).
- E. Insect and animal activity.
- F. Scene temperature (document method used and time estimated).

Summary: Documentation of postmortem changes in the MDI report may be useful in determining an accurate cause and manner of death and corroborate witness statements. It may indicate that the body may have been moved after death. Assessing and understanding postmortem changes allows the MDI to address many of these potential issues.

6. Participate in Scene Debriefing

Principle: The scene debriefing assists the MDI and collaborating personnel from all participating agencies in establishing post-scene responsibilities by sharing data regarding scene findings. The scene debriefing provides each agency the opportunity for input regarding special requests for assistance, additional information, special examinations, and other requests requiring interagency communication, cooperation, and education. The debriefing should consider mental health follow-up for involved personnel as indicated.

Policy: The MDI shall participate in or initiate an interagency scene debriefing to identify specific post-scene responsibilities.

Procedure: When participating in a scene debriefing, the MDI should:

- A. Determine post-scene responsibilities (e.g., identification, notification, media relations, and body and evidence transportation).
- B. Determine/identify the need for additional specialists (e.g., crime laboratory technicians, social services, entomologists, Occupational Safety and Health Administration).
- C. Share investigative and interview data with appropriate agencies and personnel as required in furtherance of the investigation (e.g., to disclose the possible existence of communicable diseases).
- D. Communicate special requests to appropriate agencies, being mindful of the necessity for confidentiality.

Summary: The scene debriefing is the best opportunity for participants to communicate special requests and confirm all current and subsequent scene responsibilities. The debriefing allows participants the opportunity to establish clear lines of responsibility for a successful investigation. Complete processing of the scene may require an extended period of time beyond the initial scene investigation. This should be communicated between agencies beyond the initial scene, and investigators from different agencies need to stay in communication with each other throughout the entire investigation.

7. Determine Notification Procedures (Next of Kin or Interested and Authorized Individuals)

Principle: Every reasonable effort should be made to notify the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals as soon as possible. Notification of next of kin or interested and authorized individuals initiates the disposition of remains and facilitates the exchange of additional information relative to the medicolegal death investigation.

Policy: The MDI shall ensure that the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals are identified, located, and notified of the death as per agency policy or protocol and that all failed and successful attempts at notification by the MDI are documented.

Procedure: When determining notification procedures, the MDI should determine who will perform the following tasks:

- A. Obtain the identity of the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals.
- B. Obtain the contact information of the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals.
- C. Notify the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals and record time of notification. Or, if delegated to another agency, obtain and document confirmation when notification is made. Next of kin should be provided with the medical examiner/coroner's contact information for follow up.
- D. Notify interested and authorized individuals and agencies of the status of the next of kin notification.

Summary: The MDI may be responsible for ensuring that the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals are identified, located, and notified in a timely manner according to local protocol. The time and method of notification should be documented. Failure to locate the next of kin or interested and authorized individuals and efforts to do so should be documented. This ensures that every reasonable effort has been made to contact the family or interested and authorized individuals. When possible, notification should be performed in person.

8. Ensure Security of Remains

Principle: Ensuring security of the body requires the MDI to supervise the labeling, packaging, and removal of the remains. An appropriate identification tag is placed on the body to preclude misidentification upon receipt at the examining agency. This function also includes safeguarding all potential physical evidence, property, and clothing that remain on the body.

Policy: The MDI shall supervise and ensure the proper identification, inventory, and security of evidence/property and its packaging, as well as removal of body from the scene.

Procedure: Prior to leaving the scene, the MDI should:

- A. Ensure that the body is protected from further trauma or contamination (if not, document this trauma/contamination) and unauthorized removal of therapeutic and resuscitative equipment.

- B. Inventory and secure property, clothing, and personal effects that are on the body (remove in a controlled environment with a witness present). Images of medications, drugs, and drug paraphernalia should be taken, and the items taken into custody, per jurisdiction guidelines, as analyses may be required.
- C. Identify property and clothing to be retained as evidence (in a controlled environment).
- D. Recover biological samples before releasing the remains of decedents who will not undergo autopsy.
- E. Place identification on the body (e.g., wrist or ankle band) and body bag to include (but not limited to) the decedent name, date of birth, date and time of death, and agency-specific case number.
- F. Ensure transportation of the body is arranged.
- G. Ensure/supervise the placement of the body into the body bag and secure it.
- H. Ensure/supervise the removal of the body from the scene.

Summary: Ensuring the security of the remains facilitates proper identification of the remains, maintains a proper chain of custody, and safeguards property and evidence.

Section E: Recording Decedent Profile Information

This section discusses establishing the decedent profile. The decedent profile may aid in cause and manner of death determination and may influence subsequent levels of investigation, jurisdiction, and authority. The content should include: 1) Discovery History, 2) Circumstances of Death, 3) Medical History, 4) Mental Health History, and 5) Social History. Various sources of information may be used to obtain information about the decedent profile, and there may be overlap in the information obtained from different sources. How information is gained and from whom is important in all aspects of the investigation. Whenever possible, confirmation should be obtained in the form of official documentation and firsthand information.

1. Discovery History

Principle: Establishing a decedent profile includes investigating and documenting circumstances surrounding discovery of the death.

Policy: The MDI should investigate and document the circumstances surrounding discovery of the death.

Procedure: The MDI should obtain and document the following:

- A. Date and time the body was discovered.
- B. Name and contact information of the individual(s) who discovered the body.
- C. The circumstances leading to discovery of the death.
- D. Physical location where the body was discovered, including street address, zip code, and, when appropriate, GPS coordinates.

Summary: The MDI must produce clear and detailed documentation of how the death was discovered.

2. Circumstances of Death

Principle: Events preceding the death may play a significant role in determining cause and manner of death. Documentation of medical intervention(s) and procurement of antemortem specimens help to establish the decedent's medical state prior to death.

Policy: The MDI should document known circumstances and medical intervention(s) preceding death.

Procedure: In order to determine terminal episode history, the MDI should document:

- A. When the decedent was last known to be alive. Include the date, time, and physical address last known alive as well as the name and contact information of the witness who provided this information.
- B. Potentially significant incidents occurring at least one month prior to the death, including changes in health status, recent healthcare visits or treatments, changes in medications, any significant injury, or any medical complaints/symptoms that had been reported preceding death.
- C. Name and associated records of responding emergency medical services and/or treating hospital facility along with resuscitative and other measures.
- D. Any treatments that may impact toxicological interpretation (e.g., dialysis or administration of narcotics, fluid, or blood products.)

Summary: Information about circumstances prior to death and medical treatment may assist in determining cause and manner of death and may distinguish medical treatment from other sources of trauma.

3. Medical History

Principle: Establishing the decedent's medical history helps to narrow potential causes of death. The medical history may also aid in interpretation of scene findings and manner of death determination.

Policy: The MDI should document the decedent's past medical and surgical histories.

Procedure: Through interviews with witnesses, family, and care providers and review of medical records, the MDI should document:

- A. Decedent medical and surgical history.
- B. Decedent medication history. Include any prescription, over-the-counter, non-traditional, holistic, and alternative (non-mainstream) or complementary practices and approaches. Refer to Section C item 4 for details on what information should be captured.
- C. Information from any traditional or alternative healthcare providers and/or related agencies. (e.g., chiropractors, acupuncturists, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, physical therapists, holistic healers, or direct entry midwives).
- D. Pertinent family medical history, including that of sudden, unexpected, or premature death — and whether the decedent is biologically related to their family.

Summary: A thorough medical history focuses the medicolegal death investigation, provides important context, and helps determine appropriate disposition of the case. Potential sources of medical information should include, but are not limited to, personal records, family, caregivers, EMS, emergency departments, hospitals, medical offices, correctional facilities, nursing homes, hospice agencies, and assisted-living facilities.

4. Mental Health History

Principle: The decedent's mental health history and antemortem status can provide insight into possible cause and manner of death and may aid in interpretation of scene findings.

Policy: The MDI should obtain information from sources familiar with the decedent's mental health history.

Procedure: The MDI should obtain and document the following:

- A. Decedent's mental health history, including known behavioral issues, hospitalizations, diagnoses, and medications.
- B. Family mental health history.
- C. Names and contact numbers of mental health professionals (e.g., psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or counselors) who are currently treating the decedent as well as the names of professionals who have treated the decedent in the past.
- D. Any recent or remote history of suicidal thoughts, plans, and/or attempts. Include the source of this information.
- E. Any recent events, behavior changes, important dates, medication changes, drug use, or other potentially influential events on the decedent's mental health, such as court appearances, divorce or separation, or death of a loved one.

Summary: Knowledge of mental health history provides additional information that may aid in determination of cause, manner, and circumstances of death.

5. Social History

Principle: Social history addresses familial, occupational, and recreational aspects of the decedent's life. Social history may add important contextual information about the decedent, including marital/domestic history, relationships, sexual orientation and gender identity, employment history, financial history, routines, habits, activities, written or electronic correspondence, educational background, criminal activity and incarcerations, legal matters, substance use/treatment, and other potential sources of information relevant to determining the cause and manner of death.

Special consideration is required in dependent individuals such as infants, children, and other dependent populations, including elderly or disabled individuals who may rely on others to communicate and interpret many aspects of their social history.

Policy: The MDI shall obtain social history information from a variety of sources, including individuals familiar with the decedent as well as personal effects, correspondence, electronics, official records, and social media sites.

Procedure: The MDI should obtain and document (list is not inclusive):

- A. Current and past marital/domestic history, including sexual/romantic partners and living children. This includes history of interpersonal violence directed toward the decedent at any stage of life.
- B. Significant relationships (e.g., friends, adversaries, co-workers, caregivers, and romantic relationships).
- C. Sexual orientation and gender identity, including relevant sexual history.
- D. Employment history, including any work-related changes or difficulties.
- E. Financial history, including any financial difficulties, as well as the person or entity responsible for managing the decedent's finances.
- F. Daily routines, habits, activities, and hobbies as well as any unusual or altered behavioral patterns. Include developmental milestones reached by infants, children, and adolescents and activities of daily living for dependent individuals.
- G. Pertinent written or electronic correspondence (e.g., social media sites, text messages, postal mail, emails, or handwritten notes).
- H. Religious, cultural, or other pertinent information, such as funerary practices, objection to autopsy, or objection to other routine death investigation processes.
- I. Criminal history, such as drug/human trafficking, robbery, burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, resisting arrest, and witness intimidation/elimination as well as associated background that preceded the death, such as court dates or imprisonment.

Summary: Circumstantial information pertaining to the decedent's social history can be acquired from a variety of sources and may assist in the determination of cause, manner, and circumstances of death. Care must be taken to verify information obtained about dependent populations (e.g., children, persons with special needs, or elderly persons).

Section F: Completing the Scene Investigation

This section discusses completing the scene investigation. The content is organized into four areas: 1) Maintain Custody of the Body and Ensure Proper Disposition, 2) Perform Exit Procedures, 3) Assist the Family or Authorized Individual(s), and 4) Release Custody of the Body.

1. Maintain Custody of the Body and Ensure Proper Disposition

Principle: Maintaining custody over the body allows the MDI to protect the chain of custody as the body is transported from the scene for further examination, specimen collection, or storage.

Policy: The MDI shall make final determination of custody of body and maintain jurisdiction of the body by arranging for the body to be transported for additional examination or specimen collection. Transportation services should be properly licensed and/or insured.

Procedure: When maintaining custody over the body, the MDI should:

- A. Transport or arrange for secure transportation of the body to a medical, autopsy, or funeral home facility for further examination or to temperature-controlled storage. Transportation should be documented.
- B. Coordinate and document procedures to be performed when the body is received at the facility.
- C. Ensure body is secured in a sealed body bag (or suitable equivalent) with a unique identification tag. Refer to Section D item 8 for additional details.

Summary: By providing documented secure transportation of the body from the scene to an authorized receiving facility, the investigator maintains jurisdiction and safeguards the body and chain of custody of the body.

2. Perform Exit Procedures

Principle: Completion of the medicolegal scene investigation ensures that evidence has been collected and the scene has been processed. In addition, a systematic review of the scene ensures that artifacts or equipment are not inadvertently left behind and any dangerous materials or conditions have been reported and documented.

Policy: At the conclusion of the scene investigation, the MDI shall conduct a post-investigative walkthrough and ensure the scene investigation and documentation is complete. Ensure that all relevant evidence for the determination of cause and manner of death has been collected, secured, and packaged following office policies and protocols. Make sure that materials are not inadvertently left behind and dangerous materials or conditions have been documented and reported to the proper entities.

Procedure: When performing exit procedures, the MDI should:

- A. Identify, inventory, and remove all evidence collected by the MDI at the scene.
- B. Remove all medicolegal death investigation equipment and materials from the scene.
- C. Report and document any dangerous materials or conditions.
- D. Alert family or interested and authorized individuals to potential unsafe scene conditions.

Summary: Conducting a scene walkthrough upon exit ensures that all evidence has been collected, materials are not inadvertently left behind, and any dangerous materials or conditions have been documented and reported to the proper authorities.

3. Assist the Family or Authorized Individual(s)

Principle: The MDI should provide the family or authorized individual(s) with an estimated timeline so they can arrange for final disposition of the body. In addition, the MDI should offer information on available community and professional resources that may assist the family.

Policy: The MDI shall offer the decedent's family or authorized individual(s) information regarding the process, estimated timeline, and available community and professional resources.

Procedure: When the MDI is assisting the family or authorized individual(s), it is important to:

- A. Identify yourself and explain what your role is and why are you are investigating the death.
- B. Inform them that an autopsy may be required.
- C. Advise them of available support services (e.g., victim assistance, police, social services, or scene cleanup).
- D. Inform them of appropriate agencies to contact with questions (e.g., medical examiner/coroner offices, law enforcement, or support group).
- E. Ensure that the family or authorized individual(s) is not left alone with the body (if circumstances warrant).
- F. Inform them of the estimated body release timetable.
- G. Advise them of the estimated information release timetable (e.g., toxicology and autopsy results).
- H. Inform them of available reports, including cost, if any.
- I. Inform them that they might be contacted regarding organ and tissue donation.
- J. Advise them of your office's disclosure of information policy or any statutory guidelines for release of information and/or reports.
- K. Ensure they have necessary paperwork and contact information and that the MDI has the family's contact information.

Summary: Interaction with the family or authorized individual(s) allows the MDI to assist and direct them to appropriate resources and essential information regarding the process of the death investigation. It is essential that families or authorized individual(s) be given an estimated timeline of events so necessary arrangements can be initiated.

4. Release Custody of the Body

Principle: Prior to releasing jurisdiction and custody of the body to an authorized receiving agent or funeral director, it is necessary to determine the person responsible for certification of the death. Information required to complete the death certificate includes demographic information, date, time, and geographical location of death.

Policy: The MDI shall obtain sufficient information to enable completion of the death certificate and release jurisdiction and custody of the body.

Procedure: When releasing jurisdiction and custody of the body, the MDI should:

- A. Determine who will sign the death certificate, including name, credentials, agency, and contact information.
- B. Confirm the date, time, and geographical location of death and injury details, if applicable.
- C. Identify indwelling or implanted devices when indicated.
- D. Document and arrange with the authorized receiving agent to reconcile all death certificate information.
- E. Release the body to an authorized funeral director or other authorized agent.

Summary: The MDI releases jurisdiction and custody of the body after determining who will sign the death certificate; documenting the date, time, and geographical location and death; and releasing the body to an authorized funeral director or other authorized agent.

Appendix A: Investigative Tools and Equipment

The following list represents commonly used items suggested for scene investigations performed by MDIs. The list is not exhaustive and individual needs will vary based on climate, rurality, unique case scenarios, and collaborative agreements with other responding agencies. All equipment should be in good working condition and reusable items (e.g., gloves and body bags) should be stocked appropriately so that new ones may be used on each new case.

MDIs often work in collaboration with law enforcement, EMS, and crime scene technicians, but they must be prepared to ensure their own safety and security as well as that of the decedent and associated evidence.

Safety and Comfort*

- Gloves (glove liners optional)
- Eye protection/face shields
- Masks (N95 as needed)
- Biohazard suits/aprons/gowns
- Reflective vests
- Shoe covers
- Hair covers
- Hand sanitizer
- Surface disinfectant wipes
- Bags for garbage and biohazard disposal
- Sharps disposal containers

* Specialized safety equipment necessary for biological, chemical, industrial, mass disaster, and fire scenes are not addressed in this list and should be considered in the context of the local jurisdictions and partner resources.

- First aid kit
- Outdoor field supplies (e.g., sunscreen, hat, raingear, and insect spray)

Examination and Documentation

- Perimeter tape
- Barrier sheeting, screen, or tent to shield body and evidence from weather and public view
- Appropriate lighting (e.g., headlamps and flashlights)
- Navigation equipment (e.g., maps, compass, and GPS)
- Measurement instruments (e.g., tape measure, ruler, and thermometer)
- Presumptive/qualitative blood test kits
- Watch or other timekeeping devices
- Investigative notebooks, electronic notepads, and appropriate writing instruments
- Paper or electronic scene investigation forms (e.g., property receipts, SUIDIRF, and chain of custody)
- Audio recording equipment
- Photo and video documentation equipment (including identifiers and photo scales)
- Spare batteries or recharging equipment appropriate for any electronic equipment

Collection and Storage

- Miscellaneous evidence recovery equipment (e.g., swabs and swab boxes, syringes and needles, forceps/tweezers, hand lens/magnifying glass, blades, and tape lifts)
- Packaging materials (e.g., clean unused paper bags, envelopes, plastic containers, metal cans, tape, rubber bands, and body fluid specimen containers)
- Evidence tape/seals

- Body bags
- Locks for body bags and other containers, ideally with unique ID numbers
- Body identification tags

Miscellaneous Scene Response Items

- Official identification
- Communication equipment (e.g., cell phone or radio)
- Scene bags and carrying cases
- Phone lists and contact information (electronic and/or paper)
- Resource material (e.g., scene cleanup, grief support resources, or organ procurement)
- Doll reenactment materials (doll, “placed” and “found” placards)
- Other items that may be needed on occasion include:
 - Hand tools (e.g., bolt cutter, hammer, metal detector, paint brushes, pocketknife, rope, or shovel)
 - Unused paint cans for volatile material collection
 - Entomology collection materials
 - Water recovery body bags
 - Access to portable scene lighting

Appendix B: Glossary of Select Technical Terms Used in This Guide

Cause of Death

Medical opinion of the disease or injury that resulted in a person's death.

Coroner

An elected or appointed official responsible for overseeing medicolegal death investigations — usually for a single county — and for certifying the cause and manner of death in these investigations. Duties vary based on local statutes.

Decedent

A deceased person or any suspected human remains.

Forensic Pathologist

A physician who is board-certified in forensic pathology by an accredited credentialing body, currently the American Board of Pathology or the American Osteopathic Board of Pathology.

Jurisdiction

This term is used to indicate either:

- A. The legal authority to make legal decisions and judgments regarding a death, to include medicolegal death investigation, autopsy, and certification of cause and manner of death.
- B. The geographic area in which a medical examiner or coroner's authority applies.

Note: Legal authority is granted by governing statutes and is confirmed upon reporting of death. The medical examiner or coroner may elect to “release” or “retain” jurisdiction over deaths that are reported to them.

Manner of Death

Classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred. It usually consists of accident, homicide, natural, suicide, and undetermined. These manners are then used for public health and vital statistics purposes.

Medical Examiner

An appointed official, often a forensic pathologist, whose duty it is to oversee medicolegal death investigations, perform postmortem examinations or direct such examinations to occur, and certify cause and manner of death. Duties vary based on local statutes.

Medicolegal Death Investigator (MDI)

A professional having the legal authority to investigate deaths for a medicolegal jurisdiction (i.e. medical examiner/coroner). MDIs perform scene investigations and initial physical examinations, collect evidence, and develop decedent's medical and social histories to assist with cause and manner of death determination. Professional MDIs complete requirements for certification (registry or board) by an accredited credentialing body, currently the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (see the board's "Policies and Procedures Manual").

Note: MDIs are distinct from law enforcement. However, in some less-developed jurisdictions, law enforcement may be tasked with serving in both capacities and must alternatively operate in two distinct roles, governed by distinct statutes.

Notification of Death

A term indicating notification of the death to the MDI. This step may be referred to as "death reporting" in other publications.

Scene

A term used to indicate several potential locations that the MDI may be responsible for investigating during a medicolegal death investigation, including:

- **Death scene:** Location or site at which death is pronounced or where the death occurred. This may not be the current location of the body and may be distinct from the incident scene. For a discovered dead body, the death scene may not be where the dead body was discovered. It may not be possible to conclusively prove where the death occurred (such as with a dumped body).
- **Incident scene(s):** Potential location(s) at which a fatal injury or fatal sequence of events was initiated. This may not be the current location of the body and may be distinct from the death scene. For example, a person may be shot at an incident scene, but later moved to another location prior to death (the death scene).

Example: In the case of a sudden, unexpected, infant death (SUID), the scenes may include the emergency department where the infant was declared deceased, the residence where the infant lived, the childcare facility where the infant was found unconscious, and even the vehicle used to convey the infant to the hospital.

Witness(es)

This term is used to describe any number of individuals who may have relevant information about the decedent or events associated with the death. This includes, but is not limited to, individuals present at the death scene or incident scene(s) and friends, family, and acquaintances who may have relevant information about the death or preceding events.

For additional terms and definitions, see “[Medicolegal Death Investigation: Terms and Definitions, OSAC 2022-N-0026](#),” produced by the Committee Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science, which is managed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

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