

DEKALB POLICE DEPARTMENT

Subject: **Death Investigations and Notifications**

Policy #: **402.8**

Effective Since: 8-21-03

Revision Effective: 6-16-20

FTO Training Tasks: # 43

Reference Material: IACP Research Papers

ILEAP Standards Covered: NA

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PURPOSE: The purpose of this policy is to provide responding and investigating officers with guidelines for conducting preliminary investigations of deceased persons.

POLICY: Reported deaths of persons, other than those under the immediate care of a physician at a hospital, similar health care facility, or Hospice patients shall be responded to by officers of this department for investigation and for purposes of providing basic assistance to survivors. It is the responsibility of responding officers in cooperation with homicide investigators, emergency medical responders, physicians, and the medical examiner to establish the manner of death whether naturally, by accident, suicide, homicide, or unknown causes. In so doing, officers shall approach the investigation of any death that is not attended by a physician in a health care setting, or a Hospice patient death, as a potential homicide, regardless of how it is reported, and shall follow procedures as detailed in this policy to assist in determining the cause and manner of death.

DEFINITIONS: none

PROCEDURES:

A. Initial Response: Deceased persons or persons near death may be encountered in response to a wide variety of calls for service. Officers who encounter such situations shall, in order of importance and based on the circumstances, perform the following:

1. Ensure officer safety and the safety of others by safeguarding any weapons at the scene.
2. Administer emergency first aid if necessary and/or summon emergency medical personnel.
3. Identify and arrest any perpetrator(s) present.
4. Isolate and protect the crime scene from any intrusion by non-essential personnel including officers not directly involved in the crime scene investigation.
5. Death can only be determined in an official capacity by a physician. However, in cases involving unmistakable evidence of death (e.g., the obvious presence of lividity or rigor mortis), emergency medical personnel need not be summoned.
6. If the officer determines that the person is dead, the factors surrounding that determination shall be entered into the officer's report.
7. Officers shall resolve any doubt concerning the life or death of a subject by summoning appropriate medical assistance.
8. Where emergency medical personnel are on the scene or have been summoned, provide such personnel with as much latitude as possible to deliver emergency medical services notwithstanding officers' responsibility to protect the crime or incident scene.
9. Notify communications of the circumstances and request the response of a supervisor and any additional personnel as needed. If the death is perceived to be a homicide or potential homicide or the result of accident or suicide, an investigative officer shall also be summoned, and the shift commander notified.
10. Observe and note pertinent circumstances at the scene.
11. Record the nature of any physical modifications to the crime scene as the result of intervention by emergency medical personnel or others.
12. Record in a crime scene log the identity of any persons who were present at or who entered the crime scene, including emergency and investigative personnel.
13. Identify witnesses and record basic information regarding the event. Ask witnesses to remain, if possible. If not possible, determine their identity and how they can be contacted by investigators.

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14. Identify and ensure that any suspects do not leave. Responding officers may conduct basic, preliminary questioning of a suspect or witness, but should normally defer investigative interviews to investigators.
15. Ascertain if the deceased was under a physician's care for a potentially life-threatening health problem, and note the name, telephone number, and address of the physician.
16. In deaths apparently resulting from natural causes, determine, to the degree possible, the deceased's physical condition before death.
17. Do not release any information concerning the deceased to the press or the public without agency authorization and until next-of-kin have been notified as established by policy of this agency.

B. Supervisor Responsibilities : A supervisory officer shall respond to any reported death that is not attended by a physician in a health care setting, or a Hospice patient death.

Responsibilities of the supervisory officer include but are not necessarily limited to the following:

1. In a crime scene situation, verify that appropriate requests have been made for assistance by crime scene technicians, homicide investigators, command personnel and request any additional personnel to protect the crime scene or conduct the investigation as necessary.
2. Receive a verbal report from initial responding officers regarding pertinent conditions at the scene upon their arrival, circumstances surrounding the death, the presence of witnesses and/or suspects, disposition of the body, and related details.
3. Ensure completion of preliminary information collection and the protection and integrity of the crime or incident scene.
4. Notify the on-call Commander as soon as possible when the death may be criminal in nature. **For non-emergent situations, notification can be made through an electronic message.**

C. Death by Natural Causes

1. The deceased's body may be released to a mortuary that the next of kin have chosen if the following conditions are met:
 - a. There are no indications of foul play, accident, or suicide; or
 - b. The deceased was under the ongoing care of a physician for a life-threatening disease or illness; and
 - c. The coroner agrees to such.
2. Bodies shall not be moved unless located in an undesirable location (e.g., in open view of the public) and only under conditions noted above that do not require an extensive police investigation.
3. Emergency medical personnel or funeral home attendants may be requested to move bodies when necessary and permitted.
4. In all other cases, bodies may be covered but may not be moved without approval of the coroner or homicide investigators.

D. Death by Other Than Natural Causes

1. In all cases of death involving a police investigation, the coroner's office shall be notified.
2. In any case in which there are suspicious circumstances that cast doubt concerning the cause of death, the coroner's office and criminal investigators shall be notified and shall be responsible for conducting an investigation of the death.

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3. In cases of death by accident, suicide, homicide, or undetermined causes, the supervisor shall coordinate with homicide investigators and the coroner's office in protecting the scene and conducting a preliminary investigation of the incident.

E. Assistance to Survivors

1. Providing basic support and crisis assistance to survivors is the responsibility of both responding officers and investigators. The nature of such assistance must be dictated by the circumstances, but officers should use the following as a guide in these instances.
2. Officers should not leave the scene of a death where survivors are present until reasonably assured that the survivors have adequate personal control and/or family or close friends readily available to provide support. In gauging the need for assistance, officers shall also consider the following:
 - a. The emotional reactions and physical condition of the survivors;
 - b. Availability of other adults in the home or immediate area;
 - c. Responsibility of the survivors for infants or small children;
 - d. Home environment, if apparent, (e.g. evidence of excessive alcohol use or drug use, lack of means of financial support, shortage of food, problem with shelter, etc.); and
 - e. Availability of a support system (e.g. including friends, family, close neighbors, access to clergy, means of transportation, etc.)
3. Officers should remain alert to the need of survivors for emergency medical assistance; for example, in cases of physical or emotional collapse or related problems.
4. Officers should be aware of confusion on the part of survivors. They should speak slowly and deliberately, and write down any pertinent information that survivors may need. This may include such matters as the following:
 - a. Coroner or funeral home information;
 - b. Locating and securing the victim's personal effects;
 - c. Meeting identification requirements/procedures; and
 - d. Providing investigator's names, agency, and telephone numbers.
5. Officers should assess the physical and emotional well-being of survivors before departing. Officers should be reasonably assured that survivors can take care of themselves and those for whom they may be responsible.
6. Officers should not leave a lone survivor unattended until all reasonable efforts have been made to garner first-hand support from the survivor's family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, family, clergy, crisis counselors, or other community social service agency.
7. The services of the department's chaplain may be offered to the family. See Policy 201.5.

F. Death Notifications

1. This procedure will also be followed when notifying next of kin of incapacitated or otherwise seriously ill or injured family members.
2. Where possible, two officers (preferably a male and female team) should be assigned to a death notification.
3. All death notifications that are the responsibility of this agency shall be delivered in person unless the exigency of circumstances demand telephone notification.
4. Where another agency must be contacted to notify the next of kin, officers should:
 - a. Request that the notification be made in person, and

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- b. Request immediate verification when notification has been accomplished.
5. Prior to contacting next of kin, notifying officers should gather and familiarize themselves with essential details concerning the deceased, to include full name, age, race and home address, as well as details of the death, location of the body/personal effects and other pertinent information.
6. Upon arrival at the residence or place of business, officers shall do the following:
 - a. Check the accuracy of the location;
 - b. Request to speak to the immediate survivor;
 - c. Identify themselves by name, rank and departmental affiliation;
 - d. Verify the relationship of the survivor to the deceased; and
 - e. Ask permission to enter the residence or (in the case of a business or other location) move to a place of privacy.
7. Every reasonable effort shall be made to make the death notification in the privacy of the survivor's home or in another location away from public scrutiny.
8. Prior to making notification, officers should, where possible, bring members of the family together who may be in the house or otherwise on hand.
9. Officers should address the survivor(s) in a straightforward manner and use easy-to-understand language to briefly explain the circumstances of the incident and the fact that the individual is dead.
10. Officers should not leave upon completion of the notification until reasonably assured that the survivor has adequate personal control and/or family or close friend(s) readily available to provide support.
11. Officers should provide any additional information on the incident requested by survivors. While graphic details may not be necessary, officers should provide information if asked specifically concerning the cause of death, condition of the body, or other details of the fatality.
12. Officers should assess the physical and emotional well-being of the survivor before departing. Officers should be reasonably assured that survivors can take care of themselves and those for whom they may be responsible.
13. Officers should not leave a lone survivor unattended until all reasonable efforts have been made to garner first-hand support from the survivor's family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, family clergy, crisis counselors or other community social service agency.
14. The services of the department's chaplain may be offered to the family. See Policy 201.5.

Policy originally issued 8-21-03; this revision becomes effective on 1-1-19 by authority of the Chief of Police.

NOTE: This policy and procedure summarizes the department's position on this specific matter. This policy is for general direction and guidance primarily designed for use by the department's members. This policy is for internal use only and does not create or enlarge an officer's liability in any way. This policy shall not be construed as the creation of a higher standard of safety or care in an evidentiary sense, with respect to third party claims. Violations of this policy, if proven, can only form the basis of an internal departmental complaint and then only in a non-judicial administrative setting.