**SECTION 9: NOTIFICATION OF NEXT OF KIN**

**INTRODUCTION**

The most challenging duty of the Coroner Investigator is working with families. The Coroner Investigator is working with families on perhaps the worst day of their lives. Emotions run high and often families are unprepared for the event. The Coroner Investigator serves as a guide in providing the family with information they need. The Coroner Investigator must show the utmost professionalism, courtesy and empathy when dealing with families.

The Coroner Investigator must be aware that the moment you are sharing is a moment the family/survivors will never forget. The face and voice of the professional delivering such a message as well as their feeling of how they were treated will likely remain in their memory for a long time to come**.**

Once the next of kin have been notified, the Coroner will be in contact with the family to advise them of the results of the investigation and/or autopsy, to obtain other information as needed and to assist and coordinate the investigation with the funeral plans. The Coroner also makes referrals to specific groups such as the Sudden Infant Death Program and suicide survivor groups as the situation dictates.

If next of kin are outside the county (maybe in other states or countries), the Coroner connects with out of state law enforcement officials so that in person notifications are still facilitated. The Coroner may spend many hours locating these people and many more hours helping them to facilitate disposition of the body and/or understanding and dealing with death.”

Pursuant to ORC 313.14 the coroner shall notify any known relatives of a deceased person who meets death in the manner described by section [313.12](http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/313.12) of the Revised Code by letter or otherwise. The next of kin, other relatives, or friends of the deceased person, in the order named, shall have prior right as to disposition of the body of such deceased person. If relatives of the deceased are unknown, the coroner shall make a diligent effort to ascertain the next of kin, other relatives, or friends of the deceased person. The coroner shall take charge and possession of all moneys, clothing, and other valuable personal effects of such deceased person, found about or pertaining to such body, and shall store such possessions in the county coroner’s office or such other suitable place as is provided for such storage by the board of county commissioners.

**9a: NEXT OF KIN HIERARCHY**

Next of kin shall be considered in the following progression:

1. Spouse of decedent if any

2. Children of decedent 18 years of age and older, if any

3. Guardians of children of the decedent under the age of 18, if any

4. Parent of the decedent if any

5. Siblings of the decedent if any

6. Any other “blood” relative of the decedent, if any

If decedent has no next of kin, friends of the decedent may accept responsibility for final arrangements.

**9b: GUIDELINES FOR LOCATION NEXT OF KIN**

The Coroner Investigator should use all resources available to locate next of kin. Those resources include but are not limited to:

1. Information from bystanders/friends

2. Personal telephone books

3. Cell phone records

4. Landline phone records

5. Law enforcement records

6. Healthcare provider records

7. Mail found at the scene of death

8. Emergency contact cards in wallets/purses

9. Internet searches

Not all these sources will provide a physical location of next of kin. In this age of cell phones, a cell phone number may be all the Coroner Investigator may have, making in-person notifications impossible.

**9c: MAKING NOTIFICATION**

When next of kin are not on the death scene and next of kin have been located, the Coroner Investigator must make notification in a timely fashion. Time is of the essence in making notification. However, expediency should not be a substitute for proper etiquette regardless of the consequences of additional expenses that may be charged to the Coroner’s Office or a delay in making notification.

Sometimes, others on scene may want to make the notification. This can occur when a relative on the scene is other than the primary next of kin. Allowing this is acceptable with the understanding that the next of kin be instructed to call the Coroner Investigator upon notification.

When making the notification, the Coroner Investigator needs to be direct yet sensitive. Some next of kin may want very little detail, some may want complete detail. Each Coroner Investigator will have an approach that works for him/her.

The following are some basics to assist the Coroner Investigator:

1. Whenever possible, a team should make the notification. The team should consist of:
   1. A uniformed law enforcement officer,
   2. A Victim’s Assistant (i.e. VOCA) Program volunteer if appropriate and/or LOSS Team
   3. A coroner representative if appropriate
2. Offer official identification and business cards.
   1. You may want to delay the use of the word “Coroner” upon initial contact.
   2. Present your business card as part of your exit strategy.
   3. Wear your identification badge.
3. Make the notification in person, FACE TO FACE. Telephone calls are not preferable unless the Coroner Investigator cannot determine geographic location of the next of kin. Written notification may be used as a last resort when no physical address is available (for example, PO Box only).
4. Ask the person(s) to sit down and sit with them. Never stand over or physically down downward to the family member.
5. Verify that they are the family of the injured or deceased. Ask directly, “Are you the family of John Smith?”
6. Use the injured or deceased person's name and include the facts. Use direct language and do not try to overprotect through euphemisms. Say, “I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.” Pause a moment. “Your father, John has been assaulted and he is dead.” Pause a moment and then make a supportive statement “I wish I didn't have to tell you this” or “I’m so sorry.”
7. Let the person respond and ask questions.
8. Be prepared for a physical reaction, including fainting, shortness of breath and nausea. Be aware of the potential for a physical attack.
9. Do not restrain the person unless there is imminent danger of injury to themselves or others.
10. Those who are notifying should allow a display of their own emotions. This validates the person(s) being notified, demonstrates concern and has been shown to have a long lasting, positive effect.
11. Continue to use the victim's name not “the body” or “the deceased.”
12. If substantial time has passed before the notification was made, explain why. Explain the importance of taking the time to ensure information and verification before making the notification.
13. If information must be withheld, explain why. Do not tell the family, “you don't need to know” or “we can't tell you.” If possible, give them a time frame for when you can give them this information.
14. Ensure that the person(s) is transported to the hospital or any other destination.
15. Stay with the person(s) until they have alternate support.
16. Leave written information including the names of the staff that made the notification and the location of the victim. Also, include addresses and telephone numbers of resources and provide information on the autopsy and morgue procedures.
17. When making notifications, resist the temptation to try to comfort people by making promises.
18. Before leaving, tell the family “Dealing with the death of a loved one is harder than most people think” and “Please feel free to call anytime if you have any questions.”
19. Identify a contact person within the family. Ask that this designee be the one to make and receive all contact with the Coroner’s Office.
20. Always follow-up on any commitments to contact the family.
21. Provide families with the most recent copy of Union County Coroner’s Office information pamphlet.

If notification is to be made to next of kin outside of the Coroner Investigator’s county of jurisdiction, the Coroner Investigator shall:

1. Determine the jurisdiction of residence of the next of kin.
2. The Coroner Investigator shall personally contact that jurisdiction for their policy on receiving notification from the Coroner’s Office.
   1. Some jurisdictions will accept the Coroner Investigator’s verbal report as being legitimate and will make the notification.
   2. Some jurisdictions will require written documentation in the form of a teletype from the Union County Communications Center. Contact those personnel for assistance.
3. Provide the next of kin’s contact information, name of the decedent and brief history of the circumstances.
4. Provide a contact number for next of kin to use.
5. Ask for the law enforcement official to contact you when notification has been made.

Once the next of kin has contacted the Coroner Investigator, the above guidelines may be adapted to the circumstances. Telephones notifications my follow the above guidelines with the appropriate modifications.