**SECTION 4: INVESTIGATION OF A DEATH SCENE**

**4a: Death Scene Protocol**

This section outlines the basic processing of virtually any death scene. No two scenes are the same and specific scene types require specific guidelines. These guidelines should be followed to investigate the basics of any scene. Further sections describe more detailed guidelines.

1. Contact the Coroner of Union County:

The responding investigator is to contact the Union County Coroner before the scene investigation whenever:

* The Investigator has been notified of a single incident resulting in 3 or more deaths.
* The Investigator has been notified the death is an apparent homicide.
* The Investigator has been notified the death is of an infant.
* The Investigator has been notified the death is of a high-profile individual.
* High risk scene safety.
* Extraordinary circumstances.
* Inadequate resources.

The responding Investigator is to contact the Union County Coroner with information gathered from their investigation whenever:

* The Union County Prosecutors Office is requested to the scene of an investigation.
* There is a doubt about whether the decedent should be sent for a postmortem examination.
* The Investigator needs assistance, additional resources, or guidance at a scene.

1. **Receiving a Call**
   1. The Investigator should respond to a call of a reported death within 15 minutes of receiving the notification. (If circumstances arrive that a response time will be greater than 15 minutes notify Dispatch so they can inform Law Enforcement/EMS on the scene.)
   2. The Investigator should arrive on-scene within 60 minutes of being contacted.
   3. The Investigator appearance should be professional.

**Arriving at the Scene**

***Introduce and identify self and role*:** Upon arrival at a scene, the Coroner Investigator will introduce him/herself to those individuals who are responsible for conducting the law enforcement investigation. All Coroner Investigators are provided with a photo identification card and badge that can be used for this purpose. Introductions at the scene allow the Coroner Investigator to establish formal contact with other official agency representatives. The Coroner Investigator must identify the first responder to ascertain if any artifacts or contamination may have been introduced to the death scene. The Deputy Coroner/Coroner Investigator must work with all key people to ensure scene safety prior to his/her entrance into the scene.

***Upon arrival at the scene, and prior to entering the scene, the Coroner Investigator should:***

* 1. Document location of the scene and time of arrival on the Investigative Notes form.
  2. Introduce and identify yourself and role.
  3. Exercise scene safety.

Determining scene safety for all investigative personnel is essential to the investigative process. The risk of injury from other individuals, animals, or the environment must be removed prior to initiating a scene investigation. Risks can include hostile crowds, collapsing structures, traffic, environmental and chemical threats. The Coroner Investigator will attempt to establish scene safety prior to entering the scene to prevent injury or loss of life, including contacting appropriate agencies for assistance with other scene safety issues.

1. **Fire & Explosives:** When the Coroner Investigator is summoned to a scene where a fire or explosion has or may continue to occur, the Coroner Investigator is not to proceed until the individual in command has issued an "all clear". Rescue personnel are responsible for determining whether live individuals are present. Once the determination has been made by rescue personnel that no life signs exist within the configuration, the retrieval of those assumed dead will proceed at a time when all jeopardy to the living has passed. The determination to enter such a situation is made by the individual Coroner Investigator, and the Coroner Investigator cannot be ordered into any such situation until clearance of hazard is assured.
2. **Presence of Criminality or a Dangerous Scene:** Scenes to which a Coroner Investigator has been summoned where armed and dangerous individuals are still at large, or where unruly onlookers or family members are present, and an actual threat of bodily harm is present are to be rendered safe by the law enforcement agency of jurisdiction. When weighing threat to oneself over potential harm to the evidence contained on or in a body, the Coroner Investigator must decide for one's personal safety.
3. **Handling dangerous weapons or devices:** Rules of crime/death scene processing state that any device in or on the body, or any device that is or was a factor in the death is considered within the scope of the Coroner’s Office investigation. This requirement must be tempered by the degree of danger presented by the acquisition of the device. Firearms of any sort are the responsibility of the law enforcement personnel at the scene. Regardless of where the firearm is located (under a body or in an adjoining room) it is to be managed by the law enforcement agency with jurisdiction and will be rendered safe by those individuals. Firearms are not to be transported with a body to the Coroner’s Office.
4. **Dangerous Terrain:** Under the specific authority of the Coroner’s Office must "proceed to view the body and make all proper inquiry respecting the cause and manner of death" of a body in cases where death is sudden, unexpected, or unexplained. This requires accessing locations in ravines, mountains, wells, excavations, and bodies of water. The Coroner Investigator shall, in cooperation with other search, rescue and response personnel, assess the technical nature of accessing a decedent. The Coroner Investigator shall use his/her discretion in cases of extreme hardship and hazard. The Coroner Investigator may authorize support personnel to remove a body to a safe environment, take scene photographs or other duties as assigned.
5. **Potential for Radioactivity or Hazardous Waste:** The Fire Department with jurisdiction is responsible for managing all scenes where suspected hazardous wastes or radioactive materials may exist. Scenes involving property of the United States Government would be managed by an appropriate Federal agency. No individual other than the specifically trained personnel can advise on the suitability of scene/body access. The specifically trained personnel on scene can be contacted for specific information regarding the handling of radioactive cadavers.
6. **Infectious Disease Cases:** Investigator's often must touch, examine, or remove a body or handle contaminated evidence and specimens. The health and safety of all personnel is of utmost importance. A detailed protocol to be used by Deputy Coroners/Investigators at the scene and during examination of the body may be found in the Appendix.
7. **Response Policy When Hazards Exist:** When hazards exist in doing a scene investigation that exceed the ability of the Coroner Investigator to handle in a safe manner, without risk to life or limb to the Coroner Investigator or others on the team, this information is to be relayed to the on-call pathologist and a decision will be made on how the scene investigation is to proceed.

**CONFIRM OR PRONOUNCE DEATH:** Upon arrival at a secured scene and after the appropriate introductions have been made, the Coroner Investigator shall be taken to the decedent for confirmation of death making and documenting the following observations:

Locate, view, and photograph the body

The presence/extent of rigor mortis, livor mortis, decomposition, or severe mutilation

Bilateral dilation and fixation of the pupils

Identify and document other individual who made the official pronouncement of death, including the date and time of determination

Ensure death is pronounced as required

The time and date of pronouncement are provided to the law enforcement officer

When summoned to a scene where multiple deaths have occurred, the time and date of pronouncement for all bodies at the scene will be the same

**PARTICIPATE IN SCENE BRIEFING WITH ATTENDING AGENCY REPRESENTATIVES:** The Coroner Investigator must recognize the varying jurisdictional and statutory responsibilities that apply to individual agency representative (e.g., law enforcement, fire, EMT, judicial/legal). Determining each agency's investigative responsibility at the scene is essential in planning the scope and depth of each scene investigation and the release of information to the public.

The Coroner Investigator will identify specific responsibilities, share appropriate preliminary information, and understand investigative goals of each agency present at the scene. Discussions with the law enforcement officer, criminalistics and/or crime laboratory personnel and the Deputy Coroner/Investigator will outline the requirements of each agency for processing the scene. The law enforcement officer and criminalistics personnel will determine how access will be managed. A discussion may take place now to determine if other expertise or consultation with other agencies is required.

When participating in the scene briefing, the Coroner Investigator should:

1. Locate the staging area (entry point to scene, command post, etc.)
2. Document the scene location (address, mile marker, and building name) consistent with other agencies
3. Determine the nature and scope of investigation by obtaining preliminary investigative details (e.g., suspicious versus non-suspicious death)
4. Ensure that initial accounts of incident are obtained from the first witness or witnesses
5. The law enforcement officer shall apprise the Coroner Investigator of the facts surrounding the death and information pertaining to a suspected cause and manner of death. The request for the presence of other forensic specialist will be discussed at this time
6. If criminality is suspected and a crime scene investigation is required, the law enforcement officer and the Coroner Investigator will wait for the arrival of a detective

**CONDUCT SCENE "WALKTHROUGH":** Conducting a scene walkthrough provides the Coroner Investigator with an overview of the entire scene. The walkthrough provides the Coroner Investigator with the first opportunity to locate and view the body, identify valuable and/or fragile evidence, and determine initial investigative procedures providing for a systematic examination and documentation of the scene and body. Personnel will be guided through the scene by the case agent for purposes of observation and report requirements. If pronouncement of death has not occurred, it will be done now.

Prior to or during the scene walkthrough, the following may be required:

1. Assessment of the scene boundaries- adjust appropriate (usually the responsibility of the law enforcement)
2. Establishing paths of entry and exit (usually the responsibility of law enforcement)
3. Identifying visible physical and fragile evidence
4. Documenting and photographing fragile evidence immediately
5. Locating and viewing the decedent

***\*Obtain permission to investigate or secure scene along with obtaining a search warrant if needed.***

**Establish Decedent Identification**

1. Provide for the direct visual or photographic identification of the decedent at the scene if visually recognizable.
2. In cases of no identification or questionable identification, collect and report source information relevant to scientific methods of identification, i.e., known fingerprint records, dental and skeletal radiographs.
3. Document additional information that may support identification, such as (but not limited to) personal effects, circumstances, physical characteristics, and tattoos.

**Documenting and Evaluating the Scene**

**Photograph the Scene.**

* 1. Obtain an overall view of the scene to establish the position of the decedent(s) relative to other features of the surrounding area.
  2. Photograph specific areas of the scene to provide more detailed view of objects, or scene conditions of potential importance.
  3. Photograph the scene from different angles to provide various perspectives that may prove to be beneficial.
  4. Obtain photographs even if the body or evidence has been moved.

**Develop a written description of the scene.**

* 1. Document and describe location, conditions, position of body within the overall scene, presence, and location of any objects of potential relevance, and location, estimated volume and presence of patterns/spatter of any blood or body fluids.
  2. Describe the scene environment including odors, lighting, temperatures and other characteristics or fragile evidence.

**Establish probable location of injury or illness.**

* 1. Document location where death was confirmed and GPS Coordinates if possible.
  2. Identify and record discrepancies in rigor mortis, livor mortis and body temperature.
  3. Check body, clothing, and scene for consistency/inconsistency of trace evidence and indicate location where artifacts are found.
  4. Obtain dispatch records, i.e., police, EMS.

**Locate, photograph, and describe evidence within the scene, including weapons, ligatures and other items that may have caused or contributed to death.**

* 1. NOTE: Evidence collection for the Investigator is generally limited to evidence that is on or attached to the body, or that may have played a role in the individual’s death. The role of collecting and preserving other evidence at the scene is generally the function of the presiding Law Enforcement jurisdiction.
  2. Inventory and document prescription and over-the-counter medication at the scene
     1. Including name and dosage of medication, quantity prescribed, quantity remaining, prescribed schedule of administration, when prescribed, and the prescribing physician.
     2. Controlled substances prescribed to a decedent should be counted and collected. Advise on-scene Law Enforcement officers of their presence, they may elect to collect and/or dispose of these medications per local policies.
     3. Inventory and document personal valuables attached to the body. Clothing and personal items (including jewelry, wallets, and identification cards) found on the body should be taken into evidence if the responsible next of kin is not able to accept these items now. Once the next of kin has been notified the items may be returned to them after signing the property release form.

**Interview witnesses at the scene. Document interviews of emergency medical technicians where appropriate.**

* 1. Collect all available identifying data on witnesses.
  2. Establish witness relationship/association to the deceased.
  3. Obtain information from each witness.
  4. Note discrepancies of statements.

***INTERVIEWING WITNESSES AT THE SCENE-Documented comments of witnesses at the scene allow the Coroner Investigator to obtain primary source data regarding discovery of body, witness corroboration and terminal history. The documented interview provides essential information for the investigative process.***

**Document the time of the event, time of pronouncement and response time of the scene investigator on the Investigative Notes form.**

**Establishing and Recording Decedent Profile Information**

**Document the discovery history**.

* 1. Establish and record person(s) who discovered the body and when (names, relationships).
  2. Document the circumstances surrounding the discovery (who, what, where, when how).

**Determine terminal episode history.**

* 1. Document when, where how and by whom the decedent was last known to be alive.
  2. Document the incident or circumstances before the death.
  3. Document complaints/symptoms before the death.
  4. Obtain relevant medical records to the decedent (copies).

**Obtain decedent medical history (As appropriate)**

* 1. Obtain medical history, including medications taken, alcohol and drug use, and family medical history from family members and witnesses.
  2. Obtain information from treating physicians and/or hospitals to confirm history and treatment.
  3. Document the name, address, and telephone number of a dentist as appropriate for forensic identification.
  4. Document physical characteristics and traits (i.e., left/right-handed, missing appendages, tattoos, etc.).

**Obtain decedent mental health history. (As appropriate)**

* 1. Document the decedent’s mental health history, including hospitalization and medications.
  2. Document any history of suicidal ideation, gestures, and/or attempts.
  3. Document mental health professionals (i.e., psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, etc.) who treated the decedent.
  4. Document family health history.

**Document social history. (As appropriate)**

* 1. Marital/domestic history and status.
  2. Family history (similar deaths, significant dates).
  3. Employment history if work related injuries.
  4. Daily routines, habits, and activities.
  5. Relationships, friends, and associates.
  6. Religious, ethnic, or other pertinent information (i.e., objection to autopsy).
  7. Criminal history.

**Documenting and Evaluating the Body**

***PHOTOGRAPH THE BODY:* The photographic documentation of the body at the scene creates a permanent record that preserves essential details of the body position, appearance, identity, and final movement. Photographs allow sharing of information with other agencies investigating the death. Prior to moving the body or evidence, the Investigator should:**

**Photograph the body**.

1. Photograph the body and the scene.
2. Photograph the decedent’s face along with a profile of each side.
3. Take additional photographs after removal of objects/items that interfere with photographic documentation of the decedent.
4. Photograph the surface beneath the body after the body has been removed, as appropriate.
5. Consider photographs of other individual’s that are involved with the incident if they have injuries or evidence on them.
6. Never clean the face, do not change condition.

***CONDUCT EXTERNAL BODY EXAMINATION (SUPERFICIAL): Conducting the examination provides the Coroner Investigator with objective data regarding the single most important piece of evidence at the scene, the body. This documentation provides detailed information regarding the decedent's physical attributes, his/her relationship to the scene, and possible cause, manner, and circumstances of death. At the direction of the agent in charge and in agreement with the law enforcement personnel, a body search can be conducted by the Coroner Investigator. No search will be conducted that will taint or jeopardize any evidence needed by the Coroner’s Office pathologist.***

**Conduct external body examination. (As scene allows: i.e. safety and appropriate for location)**

* 1. Document the decedent’s position with and without measurements as appropriate.
  2. Document the physical characteristics of the decedent.
  3. Document the presence of clothing and personal effect and their locations.
  4. Document the presence or absence of any items/objects that may be relevant.
  5. Document the presence or absence of marks, scars and tattoos.
  6. Document the presence or absence of injury/trauma.
  7. Document the presence or methods of resuscitative efforts.
  8. Document postmortem changes
     1. Livor mortis (color/intensity, location, fixed) consistent/inconsistent with position of the body.
     2. Rigor mortis (stage/intensity, location on the body, broken, inconsistent with the scene).
     3. Degree of decomposition (putrefaction, adiopocere, mummification, skeletonizing, as appropriate).
     4. Insect and animal activity.
     5. Inside thermostat temperature(s)/Outside Temperature(s).
     6. Description of body temperature, i.e., warm, cold or frozen; or measurement of body temperature (document method used and time of measurement

***PRESERVE EVIDENCE (BODY): The photographic and written documentation of evidence on the body allows the Coroner Investigator to obtain a permanent historical record of that evidence. To maintain chain of custody, evidence must be collected, preserved, and transported properly. Physical evidence visible on the body must be photographed. Fragile evidence (that which can be easily contaminated, lost or altered) must also be collected and/or preserved to maintain chain of custody and to assist in determination of cause, manner and circumstances of death.***

**Preserve evidence (on body)**

* 1. Photograph the evidence.
  2. Document blood/body fluid on the body (froth/purge, substances from orifices), location and pattern before transporting.
  3. Assist Law Enforcement with the placement of unused paper bags around the hands and/or feet of the decedent if appropriate as determined by scene and circumstances. (Examples: suspected homicides, potential evidence on hands that may otherwise be lost when moving or transporting the body)
     1. In cases where evidence might be compromised, obliterated, or lost during transport, evidence may be collected from the body at the scene in collaboration with the responsible Law Enforcement agency. In such cases:
        1. Establish chain of custody.
        2. Determine custodian(s) of evidence, determine which agency is responsible for collection of specific types of evidence.
        3. Identify, secure, and preserve evidence with proper containers, labels and preservatives in cooperation with presiding Law Enforcement.
        4. Document the collection of evidence by recording its location on the body, time of collection and time and location of disposition.
     2. When appropriate, ensure the presiding Law Enforcement agency has collected trace evidence before transportation of the body.

**Preserve the Body as Evidence**

* 1. Upon determination, a death is within the jurisdiction of the Coroner’s Office the body and all personal effects on the body become evidentiary material for the investigation.
  2. Tag the Body
     1. Place an identification tag on the body
        1. The great toe (Do NOT remove a sock and/or shoe to reach the toe.)
        2. Around an ankle or wrist if available.
     2. Identification tags must include the following if known:
        1. First and last name of the deceased
        2. Date of pronouncement
        3. Time of pronouncement
        4. SSN #
        5. Birth Date
     3. If the identification is not known, (unidentified body) indicate as:
     4. Unidentified Male “John Doe”
     5. Unidentified Female” Jane Doe”
     6. Or simply Unidentified remains

**Package the Body in an Appropriate Body Bag.**

* 1. Secure the tagged body in a body bag with a dual zipper closure.
  2. Secure the personal effects/or evidence being sent with the body near the chest area within the body bag and notify the receiving agency.
  3. Package the body in the bag so the zipper closure is at the head of the bag.

**Tag the body bag**

* 1. First and last name of the decedent if known
  2. Date of pronouncement
  3. Time of pronouncement
  4. SSN #.
  5. Birth Date.

**Seal the Bag**

* 1. Seal the body bag with a tamper proof seal at the head end of the bag if chain of custody is required.
  2. A numbered plastic seal should be secured through the dual zipper closure and recorded on the Investigative Notes form if required.
  3. Inform the receiving agency that the bag has been sealed.

**Determine Notification Procedures in Collaboration with Law Enforcement**

* 1. Identify next of kin.
  2. Locate next of kin.
  3. Ensure notification to next of kin.
     1. If a postmortem examination is to occur, provide the next-of-kin with a timeline describing what may occur and try to answer any questions they may have. (religious beliefs, release of body, funeral arrangements)
     2. If task is delegated to another agency, gain confirmation when notification is made.
  4. Notify concerned agencies of status of the notification.

**Ensure Security of Remains**

* 1. Ensure that the body is protected from further trauma or contamination and unauthorized removal of therapeutic and resuscitative equipment.
  2. Ensure/supervise the removal of the body from the scene.
  3. Facilitate the transportation of the body from the scene.
  4. Report the death to the autopsy facility as appropriate and provide appropriate information that pertains to the case.