

<b>Charleston County Coroner's Office Policy #15</b>	
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### 15.1 POLICY

Accurately determining a decedent's identity is one of the most important things in an investigation. Positive identification enables effective investigation of a person's death as well as confirmation. Confirmation of death allows for notification of next-of-kin; disposition of remains; completion of official records; possible criminal proceedings; and survivor grieving process. The Charleston County Coroner's Office will endeavor to positively identify every decedent whose death is investigated by this office. All methods used to identify a decedent will be recorded in the case records or Coroner's Report. If identification is proving difficult, consult with a supervisory Deputy Coroner.

### 15.2 PROCEDURE

1. In most cases, the case Deputy can feel comfortable with positive identification using photo identification and verification from family or circumstances. The identification card shall be either a state or federally-issued photo ID or driver's license found on the decedent's person (or about the decedent) consistent with the decedent's physical features. The family member or friend's confirmation (verbal or written) of the decedent's antemortem descriptions shall be documented. Photographs of identifying markers (scars, marks, tattoos, etc.) will be taken of every decedent. The identifying ID card, driver's license, or other ID shall be entered into evidence after a scan of it is entered into the MDI Log/documents section.

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2. Identification can also be determined by comparison of dental and skeletal X-rays, fingerprints, DNA, significant scars and tattoos, birth defects, and surgical procedures/prosthetics. Sources for comparison include NCIC missing person files, suspected decedent's dental records, criminal history records, jail records, medical records, etc. However, when a body is decomposed, skeletonized, burned, traumatized or there is a question as to the decedent's identity, a more scientific method should be used.

### 15.3 FAMILY VIEWING OF PHOTOGRAPHS OR DECEDENT

1. With the Coroner's approval as circumstances may dictate, black and white photographs of a decedent's face or identifying tattoos or other distinguishing features may be shown to next-of-kin or others approved by the Coroner or Chief Deputy to confirm the decedent's identification. When this method is approved, the following procedures shall be utilized:

- a) The Release and Hold Harmless Agreement will be signed by the family member/other, the Coroner/Deputy Coroner, and a witness before any photographs of the decedent are viewed. The form is in the MDI system under the 'Resources' tab then the 'Procedures' tab on the left column.
- b) The case Deputy and at least one other sworn staff member shall be present.
- c) Upon confirmation of identity, an Affidavit of Identity shall be completed. The form is in the MDI system under the 'Resources' tab then the 'Procedures' tab on the left column.

2. If circumstances dictate the necessity for in-person visual identification of the decedent ('viewing') by the family or others and when all other options are not available and with the approval of the Coroner or Chief Deputy or other circumstances that the Coroner or Chief Deputy may direct, the following procedures shall be utilized.

- a) The Release and Hold Harmless Agreement will be signed by the family member/other, the Coroner/Deputy Coroner, and a witness before the

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decedent is viewed. The form is in the MDI system under the 'Resources' tab then the 'Procedures' tab on the left column.

- b) All viewings shall take place via the viewing room window unless otherwise directed by the Coroner or the Chief Deputy.
- c) The viewings shall only be conducted during regular business hours.
- d) At least three staff members or the security guard and two staff members must be present to ensure the safety and care of the decedent, the next-of-kin/others, and the staff members.
- e) Upon confirmation of identity, an Affidavit of Identity shall be completed.

### 15.4 FINGERPRINTS

Fingerprints are the most used method of objective identification. When the decedent's fingers are in good condition to be printed, the following methods shall be used:

- a) Utilize the Morpho ID system as a first option to confirm the decedent's identity.
- b) If the use of the Morpho ID system is the ONLY source of identity for the decedent, a secondary confirmation shall be obtained to further identify the decedent where possible. Be aware of the possibility of alias names used by the Morpho ID system.
- c) If a "Hit" is obtained and confirmed, the report from the Morpho ID unit shall be downloaded and then uploaded for the case into MDILog.
- d) If the Morpho ID system is not working or is not an option or if no "hit" is registered, inked prints captured on postmortem ten-print cards shall be taken.
- e) The inked prints shall be submitted to a local law enforcement agency to facilitate a search in local files and/or AFIS and/or IAFIS. Fingerprints may also be submitted to Homeland Security and the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol for potential illegal persons.
- f) Upon receipt of the original inked prints from the assisting law enforcement agency and any associated paperwork, the case Deputy or Evidence

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Technician shall submit those items into evidence in accordance with the Property and Evidence Policy.

- g) Any reports and chain of custody from law enforcement that identify the decedent shall be scanned and uploaded for the case into MDILog.

### 15.5 ODONTOLOGY

When identification by fingerprints is not possible, then the next method of identification may be Odontology (dental records). Individual characteristics of the decedent's teeth can be compared to dental records, models, x-rays, and photos of the decedent. The investigating Deputy Coroner will need to obtain, by subpoena, if necessary, complete copies of the decedent's dental records including charts, x-rays, and photographs of the decedent's teeth. It is important when talking with family and friends to find out if the decedent was seen by more than one dentist/orthodontist. The hand-held dental x-ray unit may be used by the forensic odontologist or in some instances, the upper and lower jaws of a decedent may be resected during autopsy for identification purposes. If a forensic odontologist's services are needed for dental or bite mark identification, the Charleston County Coroner's Office will obtain those through a contracted relationship with Wolf Bueschgen, DMD.

### 15.6 DEOXYRIBONUCLEIC ACID (DNA)

1. When possible and necessary, Deputies will collect or direct the appropriate collection of samples at autopsy for DNA analysis. Post-mortem DNA testing can be performed using several different samples (Examples: Liquid blood, blood spot cards, buccal swabs, or tissue samples). Other sources which may be used include hair samples with intact roots and used razors, combs, or brushes (tooth or hair).
2. When DNA comparisons with relatives are used for identification purposes, a DNA sample from the decedent along with samples from blood relatives will be sent to an appropriate lab which may include: The South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, The Richland County Sheriff's Office, the University of North Texas or as otherwise

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directed by the Coroner. Familial samples from the decedent's parents, biological siblings, and biological children are recommended via buccal swabs.

### 15.7 RADIOGRAPHY

1. In addition to dental X-rays, a comparison of antemortem and postmortem X-rays may be utilized. X-rays of bones, chest, sinuses, past surgeries, prosthetics, etc., may be used to positively identify a decedent. Total body radiographs should be taken if other methods of identification have failed to identify the decedent up to this point.

2. If X-ray comparison is needed to make positive identification, the investigating Deputy should obtain the decedent's X-rays and forward them to the forensic pathologist or other appropriate forensic professional.

### 15.8 ANTHROPOLOGY

1. Cases involving skeletal remains or found bones, it may be necessary to use a forensic anthropologist. A forensic anthropologist will perform an in-depth examination of skeletal remains to determine if they are human or non-human. If the remains are human, they will be evaluated to determine race, sex, age, and height ancestry, injury information if applicable, and other valuable pieces of information.

2. If the investigating Deputy Coroner has a case involving skeletal remains or found bones, they will contact the forensic anthropologist. The forensic anthropologist for the Charleston County Coroner's Office is Suzanne Abel, Ph.D. After consultation with Dr. Abel, a decision will be made regarding the process and procedure for evaluating the remains found based on case circumstances.

### 15.9 UNIDENTIFIED DECEDENTS

When identification of a decedent is not proven by any of the above methods, the following checklist should be utilized to assist with the timely identification of the decedent. This list may not be all-inclusive depending on the circumstances.

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- a) Review case documents and photographs.
- b) Continue to consult with the original law enforcement agency and/or a larger agency such as the Sheriff's Office or SLED.
- c) Consider the distribution of a picture of the decedent's face.
- d) If fingerprints are available, have them run in AFIS/MorphoID again.
- e) Check NCIC Missing Person files and/or coordinate this with law enforcement.
- f) Enter DNA (if available) into NamUs.
- g) Enter in Unidentified Persons Database in the NamUS system if necessary.
- h) Conduct a web search using available information regarding the decedent.
- i) Search property/evidence again.
- j) Consider a media campaign.