

SECTION 18- PHOTOGRAPHY

I. INTRODUCTION

Documenting a death scene photographically is an essential component of a death investigator scene photographs provide a detailed permanent visual record that others can refer to and interpret in the future. For the forensic pathologist good quality scene photographs can provide context to what they observe at autopsy.

Photographs of the scene and body should be done in a systematic way so the C/DC is less likely to miss something and so the end user can follow along more easily. The photographs should have a clear primary subject and limit irrelevant background information. This may require asking others at the scene to step out of the photograph. The C/DC should photograph the scene as they find it. If the body or item of evidence has been moved prior to the arrival of the C/DC this should be documented in the written report.

Overall, Midrange, and Close-up

Composing scene photographs systematically into Overall, Midrange, and Close-up photos will improve the quality and amount of detail recorded. Well composed Overall, Midrange, and Close-up photographs should follow the C/DC through the scene to the decedent.

Overall photographs should be taken to document the relationship of the scene to the surrounding environment and orient the viewer. Overall photographs can be taken of the outside of a residence, a nearby intersection, and from all four corners of the room in which the decedent is found. Midrange or intermediate photographs establish a specific subject of interest and its context within the larger scene. Close-up photographs of a single item/subject provide an additional level of detail and should be taken with and without a scale.

Scene photographs of a deceased person are sensitive, confidential information and should be stored in a secure location - located in decedents case file on case database system.

Equipment

For the C/DC the digital camera is an essential piece of equipment for documenting the scene. The digital camera is a DSLR camera. It is important the C/DC know how to operate the camera they are working with and have knowledge of good photographic technique. Extra batteries should be kept on hand.

It is not recommended to take pictures on a cell phone.

II. SCENE TYPES AND SUGESTED PHOTOGRAPHY

1. **OVERALL GUIDELINES:** No two scenes will be exactly alike. The following sections provide basics only and each scene will need to be evaluated such that photographs taken will tell a story relating to the death being investigated. Avoid having other individuals in the photographs. Remove any artifact brought into the scene by others (except EMS). When taking photographs with a scale, shoot at a perpendicular to the scale. Use evidence markers as needed. Take one photograph of the decedent's driver's license and Social Security Card if available. Take one close-up picture of the decedent's face.
2. **NATURAL DEATHS:** In the case of presumed natural home deaths or hospital deaths, only an ID and one overall scene photograph are necessary. However, the C/DC should take additional photographs that depict lifestyle, supporting artifact or any other information that may be applicable to the investigation. If the decedent's face is extensively damaged try to shoot a profile. (The above information applies to ALL scenes.)
3. **MOTOR VEHICLE COLLISIONS (MVC):** MVC's should be photographed systematically. In daylight, an overall of the vehicles involved should be taken at different angles. Day or night, try to record points of impact and the decedent(s). Any pertinent articles should also be recorded, i.e., alcohol containers, skid marks, seat belt use, airbag deployment, etc.
4. **HOMICIDES:** Law enforcement officials may take hundreds of photographs to document a scene and the evidence. The C/DC is not concerned with all aspects of the scene rather only the decedent(s) and evidence directly related to the death. For example, the C/DC would not photograph footprints outside a house but would photograph footprints near the decedent if they showed the position of an assailant. A good order of shots is: overall of scene, decedent and cause of trauma (weapons, etc.).

5. **SUICIDES:** In general follow the same guidelines as for homicides. If it looks as though the decedent may have ingested or injected prescription medications or other drugs, photograph whatever is left or any empty containers. Try to document any pertinent objects directly related or contributory to the death. There are no clear-cut rules on what should or should not be photographed. The C/DC must employ best judgment, keeping in mind the above objectives.
6. **ON-THE-JOB DEATHS:** The safety of the C/DC is of the utmost importance. If the scene has been rendered safe by the appropriate individuals, proceed as with any other scene. A good order of shots is: overall of scene, decedent and cause of trauma (weapons, etc.).
7. **FIRE RELATED SCENES:** Investigating fire related scenes is a time consuming task requiring a considerable amount of physical work and attention to minute pieces of physical evidence. The C/DC will be responsible for investigating fire related fatalities as a result of motor vehicle accidents, structural fires or any circumstance whereby the decedent has died from thermal or inhalation injuries from a fire. The basic steps for photographing a fire scene are as follows:
 - a. **Structure Fires:**
 - i. Photograph the house, building or structure from all four sides if possible.
 - ii. Photograph any accelerant cans or evidence that might be helpful to determine cause of death.
 - iii. If the decedent is inside the structure, take an overall photograph of the room where the body is found.
 - iv. Take a full length photograph of the body prior to moving the remains.
 - v. Take a close up photograph of the face and head.
 - vi. Use your discretion to take appropriate photographs of the structure inside that might contribute to a cause of death.
 - b. **Motor Vehicle Fires:**
 - i. Take an initial photograph of the overall accident.
 - ii. Take photographs of the vehicle in which the body is in from all four sides.
 - iii. Take a photograph of the body position inside the vehicle.
 - iv. Take appropriate photographs of the vehicle interior involved in the fire. Pay particular attention to materials and articles that could have caused the fire.

c. Fire photography considerations:

Some things to consider are that dark subjects tend to require more light than lighter colored subjects. Dark subjects absorb more light, therefore fire scenes tend to reproduce rather dark photographs, especially fire scenes photographed at night. It is possible with certain cameras, to override the automatic exposure setting and get good quality photographs. If your camera/flash combination is a simple manual set-up, then just open the lens one to two stops from what would be your normal setting. If it is a full automatic set-up, adjust your ASA setting to the next lower setting from what you were using. For example, if the film you are using is 100 ASA, adjust your ASA setting to 50 ASA. This will fool the camera metering system into getting more light to the sensor. Since each camera is different use your camera's instruction manual to learn how to adjust your camera's exposure settings.

III. PHOTOGRAPH REQUESTS

The C/DC will often be asked for copies of their photographs by police and other agencies. All photographs taken for the Shelby County Coroner's Office and property of that office. Generally the SCCO photographs will be shared with the DA, ALDFS and Law Enforcement agencies. Other agencies and lawyers must submit a subpoena.

The pathologist may wish to see photos of scene prior to or after post mortem exam. These will be emailed to the DFS investigator.

All other requests, as part of public record, must go through the Coroner. Pictures can be viewed in the office under control of C/DC. Under no circumstance are pictures to be copied and released to the public.

IV. PHOTOGRAPHY DATABASE

All photographs taken should be downloaded into the correct case file number on the designated case management system. The CMS is routinely scheduled to back on SC servers. Shelby County backs up their servers on a routine basis.

Photographs are held in perpetuity, like the decedents case file.