



The Briefing Board

Number 22-60
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IMMEDIATE POLICY CHANGE **EA-17, DEATH INVESTIGATIONS**

Sworn employees, reserve deputies, and posse members are **required** to read the below Office Policy to ensure they are familiar with the changes that have been made. All sworn employees, reserve deputies, and posse members are **required** to log into [TheHUB](#), to review and acknowledge an understanding of this Office Policy within **30 days**.


Employees are reminded that *The Briefing Board* has the same force and effect of Office Policy. Division commanders shall ensure that employees have access to a copy of this *Briefing Board* announcement. Policy changes should be discussed during shift briefings, as specified in [Office Policy GB-2, Command Responsibility](#).

EA-17, DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

Effective immediately, Office Policy EA-17, *Death Investigations* is revised as follows (Changes indicated in ~~strike through~~ and **UPPER-CASE BOLD UNDERLINED** text):

PROCEDURES

- Death Investigations with Physician's Signature on the Death Certificate:** The Patrol Bureau shall have primary investigative responsibility for out of custody deaths, where the manner of death is believed to be natural. The Patrol Bureau may consult with the MCD on any death investigation, and the MCD may assist the Patrol Bureau as needed at the direction of the MCD Commander or designee. The Patrol Bureau **SHALL** ~~should~~ contact the on call MCD Death Investigations Unit Supervisor for any out of custody deaths, where the cause or manner of death cannot be assessed due to the condition of the body or scene. When the decedent has died of natural causes and the attending physician or their medical partner who is familiar with the decedent's medical history, is qualified, available, and willing to sign a death certificate, an IR shall be completed explaining the circumstances.

	MARICOPA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE POLICY AND PROCEDURES	
	Subject DEATH INVESTIGATIONS	Policy Number EA-17 Effective Date 10-25-22
Related Information Arizona Revised Statutes EA-15, <i>Security and Release of Decedent's Property</i> GE-3, <i>Property Management and Evidence Control</i> GJ-2, <i>Critical Incident Response</i> GJ-6, <i>Criminal Investigations Organization and Administration</i> GJ-7, <i>Criminal Investigations Operations</i> GJ-11, <i>Serious Diagnosed Illness, Serious Physical Injury or Death of a Prisoner or Inmate</i> GJ-12, <i>Next-of-Kin Notifications</i>	Supersedes EA-17 (12-14-21)	

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Office Policy is to establish guidelines and procedures relating to the investigation of all deaths which occur or are discovered within the jurisdiction of the Office.

Although this Office Policy refers to employees throughout, this Office Policy also applies with equal force to all volunteers. Volunteers include, but are not limited to, reserve deputies and posse members.

POLICY

It is the policy of the Office to ensure that all deaths which occur or are discovered within the jurisdiction of the Office, such as unincorporated areas of Maricopa County, Office jail facilities, courts, or any other County owned facilities, are properly investigated, documented, and proper notifications are made.

DEFINITIONS

Attending Physician: The decedent's licensed health care provider of record who was most recently in charge of the decedent's medical care.

Case Agent: The lead investigator designated for a specific investigation. The case agent is responsible for overall management of the case. This would include delegation of investigative tasks, lead tracking, collection of supplemental reports and other relevant case documentation, verifying all evidence is impounded, packaging the case for prosecution, and assisting the prosecutor with the presentation for the case in court proceedings, and providing a final disposition approval of all property and evidence held in reference to the investigation, at the conclusion of the case.

Next-of-Kin: The person or persons most closely related to a decedent by blood or affinity. For the purposes of this policy, ARS 36-831.A specifies the legal order of next-of-kin for the duty of burying the body or providing other funeral and disposition arrangements for a deceased person.

Serious Physical Injury: Injury which causes death or creates a reasonable risk of death, severe and permanent disfigurement, severe impairment of health, or loss or protracted impairment of the functions of any bodily organ or limb.

PROCEDURES

1. **Death Investigations:** The Office shall ensure all deaths which occur or are discovered within the jurisdiction of the Office are properly investigated, documented, and proper notifications are made. Death investigations shall be assigned to a case agent from a specialized unit/section of the Major Crimes Division (MCD) of the Investigations Bureau based on the apparent cause and manner of death observed during the initial assessment of the body, unless circumstances indicated in this Office Policy directs action or assignment otherwise. Investigative actions related to the various types of death specified in this Office Policy shall be followed as indicated.
 - A. The MCD Death Investigations Unit shall have the primary investigative responsibility for out of custody deaths, where the manner of death is believed to be accidental, suicide, overdose, or when decomposition has reached skeletonization. This Unit can also assist and may consult with the Patrol Bureau on natural deaths that are not determined to be an Office of Medical Examiner (OME) case. The Patrol Bureau shall contact the on call MCD Death Investigations Unit Supervisor for any out of custody deaths, where the cause or manner of death cannot be assessed due to the condition of the body or scene.
 - B. The MCD Homicide Unit shall have primary investigative responsibility for all apparent or suspected homicide deaths, or any death investigation assigned at the direction of the MCD Commander or designee.
 - C. The MCD shall have primary investigative responsibility for all death investigations involving a decedent who was seventeen years of age or younger, with the investigative responsibility assigned to a MCD specialized unit/section as determined by the MCD Commander or designee.
 - D. Further criminal investigative procedures and guidelines are specified in Office Policies GJ-6, *Criminal Investigations Organization and Administration* and GJ-7, *Criminal Investigations Operations*.
2. **Office of the Medical Examiner (OEM) Cases:** Case agents investigating a OME case shall ensure the OME is notified of the location of the decedent, in order for OME investigators to respond to the scene to conduct an independent investigation.
 - A. The OME is responsible for ensuring the proper care and transport of the decedent. A case agent or designee shall normally stay with the body until it is removed by the OME, unless the death occurred at a hospital or hospice and the body can be secured there.
 1. When requested, the case agent on scene shall interact directly with the OME investigators to assist them in conducting an initial examination of the body.
 2. Next-of-kin shall be advised to make mortuary arrangements at their convenience. The decedent's body will be released to the selected mortuary at the conclusion of the OME examination.
 3. Once the medical examiner has sealed the body bag with a numbered plastic seal, the case agent will note the seal number in the *Incident Report (IR)*.
 4. The case agent or designee shall attend the scheduled autopsy examination and shall process and impound any property or evidence, as specified in Office Policy GE-3, *Property Management and Evidence Control*.

- B. In OME cases, the removal of any organs or tissue, which was authorized by the OME shall be documented by the investigating case agent or designee and recorded in the IR.
3. **Death Investigations with No Physician Signature on the Death Certificate:** The OME must be notified in person or by phone of all death investigations for which there is no death certificate signed by an authorized attending physician. Deputies shall initially secure the scene of all medical examiner cases and request their supervisor to respond. A supervisor shall ensure notification is made to the MCD Death Investigations Unit. If the occurrence is during non-regular business hours the on-call MCD supervisor shall be contacted. Investigative action shall be determined according to the following:
- A. Non-Suspicious Death Investigations: In the case of a non-suspicious death in which the decedent was being treated for a life-threatening disease and the attending physician cannot be contacted by telephone, the case agent or designee shall call the OME.
 - 1. The OME investigator may refuse to respond to the scene based on the circumstances surrounding the death and the medical history provided to them by the case agent or designee.
 - 2. In this case, the case agent or designee shall follow the same procedures as if there were a signed death certificate.
 - B. Suspicious or accidental deaths such as overdoses or drownings, skeletal remains, and suicides shall be investigated by the Death Investigations Unit.
4. **Death Investigations with Physician's Signature on the Death Certificate:** The Patrol Bureau shall have primary investigative responsibility for out of custody deaths, where the manner of death is believed to be natural. The Patrol Bureau may consult with the MCD on any death investigation, and the MCD may assist the Patrol Bureau as needed at the direction of the MCD Commander or designee. The Patrol Bureau should contact the on call MCD Death Investigations Unit Supervisor for any out of custody deaths, where the cause or manner of death cannot be assessed due to the condition of the body or scene. When the decedent has died of natural causes and the attending physician or their medical partner who is familiar with the decedent's medical history, is qualified, available, and willing to sign a death certificate, an IR shall be completed explaining the circumstances.
- A. These cases shall normally be investigated by patrol deputies, which shall include the examination of the body, scene, and interviews of any witnesses who may have been present or had knowledge of the incident.
 - B. It is necessary for the case agent or designee to speak to the physician or their medical partner, usually by phone, to confirm that they are in fact the attending physician or medical partner who is familiar with the decedent's medical history, and that they are willing to sign the death certificate.
 - 1. Medical doctors and osteopaths licensed to practice in Arizona are legally authorized to sign death certificates; chiropractors and naturopaths are not.
 - 2. Physicians who are willing to sign a death certificate, but who were neither the attending physician or a medical partner familiar with the decedent's medical history, nor a physician treating the decedent for a potentially fatal illness within the past year, have not satisfied the statute, and therefore the death must be a OME case.
 - C. The decedent's next-of-kin may select a mortuary. If next-of-kin are not available, or have no preference as to a mortuary, the case agent or designee shall contact the Office of the Medical Examiner (OME) and advise them of the location of the decedent. The OME shall then provide the

case agent or designee with the name of a mortuary from within the district with jurisdiction over the investigation, selected on a rotation basis, for pickup of the decedent.

- D. The case agent or designee shall ensure the selected mortuary is contacted to request removal of the body. The case agent or designee shall normally stay with the body until it is removed by mortuary personnel or their designated transporters.
 - E. The case agent or designee shall include the name of the transporters in the IR or supplemental report, and whether that mortuary was used at the request of the decedent's family or through a rotation assignment by the OME.
5. **Skeletal Remains:** Upon the discovery of skeletal remains, the deputy shall secure the scene and notify their supervisor. Notification shall also be made to the MCD Death Investigations Unit for investigation. The deputy on scene should photograph the remains, and the scene, and conduct interviews of any witnesses who discovered the remains or have knowledge of the incident and provide the information to the case agent. If the occurrence is during non-business hours the on-call MCD supervisor shall be contacted.
6. **Death at a Hospital:** If a deputy is dispatched to a hospital for an unknown death, the deputy shall ask hospital personnel if the decedent died as a result of an accident or natural causes.
- A. If the decedent was admitted due to injuries sustained in a traffic accident, which is being investigated by the MCD Vehicular Crimes Unit (VCU), the VCU Supervisor will be contacted. VCU investigators will normally respond only to conduct the follow-up investigation.
 - B. If the decedent was admitted due to a natural cause, then the hospital will be referred directly to the OME; no IR is required.
7. **Serious Injury or Death Resulting from Non-Traffic Related Accidents:** In the event that serious injury or death occurs from a non-traffic related accident that involves electrical, gas, plumbing, mechanical systems including boilers and elevators, or building structural problems, the Maricopa County Building Safety Division, Planning and Zoning Section, shall be notified. Accidental deaths of this nature are OME cases and require an accidental death IR. These cases shall be investigated by the MCD and assigned at the direction of the MCD Commander or designee.
- A. A Maricopa County Planning and Zoning building inspector may be dispatched to assist in the investigation and determine if a County Building Code was violated.
 - B. Accidents involving public utilities, such as gas mains and power lines, shall be reported to the company owning and operating the facility or equipment.
 - C. When an accident occurs during non-business hours and a hazard exists, the Communications Division shall notify the appropriate authorities.
 - D. Non-traffic related accidents occurring in incorporated cities, including those for which the Office provides law enforcement by contract, should be reported to the appropriate municipal authorities.
8. **Death or Serious Physical Injury of a Prisoner or Inmate:** The death or serious physical injury of a prisoner or inmate in Office custody shall be investigated, as specified in Office Policies GJ-2, *Critical Incident Response* and GJ-11, *Serious Diagnosed Illness, Serious Physical Injury or Death of a Prisoner or Inmate*.

9. **Next-of-Kin Identification and Notification:** Next-of-Kin identification and notification shall be made, as specified in Office Policy GJ-12, *Next-of-Kin Notifications*.
10. **Property:** The case agent or designee shall impound evidence as specified in Office Policy GE-3, *Property Management and Evidence Control*, found in the vicinity of the decedent, including personal property, instruments, or weapons that may have been used in the death requiring investigation. When no next-of-kin is available to secure the decedent's residence, the procedures shall be followed, as specified in Office Policy EA-15, *Security and Release of Decedent's Property*.
11. **Arizona Crime Information Center (ACIC) / National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Check:** The case agent or designee shall request the OIC/Warrant Section run an ACIC/NCIC check to determine if there are entries in the system regarding the decedent, and if so, the OIC/Warrant Section shall be responsible for ensuring the decedent's name is removed from the system. The case agent shall ensure the ACIC/NCIC information is documented in the IR.