I. PURPOSE

The investigation of deaths and the circumstances surrounding sudden or unexplained deaths is a duty of the Harford County Sheriff’s Office. Death investigations are necessary to ensure that the circumstances of a death are properly determined and that appropriate actions are taken during the investigation.

II. POLICY

It is the policy of the Harford County Sheriff’s Office to work collaboratively with other public safety entities to ensure that investigations are fully investigated.

III. DEFINITIONS

Rigor mortis - Muscular stiffening following death. Also called postmortem rigidity

Dependent lividity - the settling of blood in relatively lower parts of the body following death. Causes a purplish red discoloration of the skin

Asystole - commonly known as flatline, is a state of no cardiac electrical activity

Medical Transport – The patient is placed in the ambulance and the ambulance has departed for a medical facility.

Resuscitation efforts - Emergency procedures consisting of external cardiac massage and artificial respiration; the first treatment for a person who has collapsed and has no pulse and has stopped breathing; attempts to restore circulation of the blood and prevent death or brain damage due to lack of oxygen
Harford County Sheriff's Office  
Policy # MAN6300: Unattended and Sudden Death Investigations

6300.1 CALLS FOR SERVICE  
6300.1.1 Harford County Sheriff's Office deputies shall respond to calls for cardiac arrests, sudden deaths, and suspicious death calls for service as dispatched.  
6300.1.2 Once a cardiac arrest is received, a deputy shall remain on scene until medical transport of the victim or until cessation of resuscitation efforts.  
6300.1.3 Once efforts at resuscitation have ceased, deputies will handle the call as a death investigation.  
6300.1.4 If notified by EMS or other medical personnel that there is a suspicious circumstance, deputies shall handle the call as a death investigation.  
6300.1.5 Deputies shall handle unattended deaths at the Harford County Detention Center (HCDC) as a death investigation and shall notify the Criminal Investigations Division regardless of the circumstances.  
6300.1.6 Criminal Investigations Division shall notify the Office of Professional Standards.  
6300.1.7 EMS providers may pronounce the death of a patient when one or more of the following criteria have been met:  
6300.1.7.1 Decapitation;  
6300.1.7.2 Rigor mortis;  
6300.1.7.3 Decomposition;  
6300.1.7.4 Dependent lividity;  
6300.1.7.5 Pulseless, apneic patient with an injury not compatible with life;  
6300.1.7.6 Once the EMS provider has terminated resuscitation per the Termination of Resuscitation protocol.

6300.2 INITIAL RESPONSE  
6300.2.1 If the investigation concludes that there are no suspicious circumstances and the deceased has been under the care of a physician in recent weeks, the investigating deputy shall contact the physician, explain the circumstances, and determine if the physician will certify the cause of death within 24 hours.  
6300.2.2 If the attending physician will not sign the death certificate or cannot be contacted within a reasonable time, the investigating deputy shall contact the medical examiner, explain the circumstances, and follow the medical examiner's instructions as to removal of the body.  
6300.2.3 If the medical examiner authorizes release of the body to the family or next of kin, the deputy shall assist the family in making arrangements for removal of the body, as dictated by the circumstances.  
6300.2.4 The investigating deputy shall prepare and submit a Field Based Report (FBR) incident report containing the facts of the case and the details of the investigation.

6300.3 INVESTIGATING DEPUTY/DETECTIVE  
6300.3.1 The investigating deputy and/or detective is responsible for the following actions on all death investigations:  
6300.3.1.1 Secure and preserve the scene pending the arrival of an Evidence
Collection Unit (ECU), if required;
6300.3.1.2 Assist ECU in the identification, collection, and submission of
evidence, if necessary;
6300.3.1.3 Conduct all necessary interviews of witnesses, friends, relatives,
neighbors, and acquaintances;
6300.3.1.4 Take written statements when possible;
6300.3.1.5 Obtain positive identification of the deceased.
6300.3.1.5.1 Positive identification should be based on next of kin, fingerprints,
dental records, and/or personal papers found on the deceased.
6300.3.1.6 Complete all investigative procedures necessary to establish the cause
and manner of death;
6300.3.1.7 Contact and brief the medical examiner, and preserve the scene
pending his/her arrival, if required;
6300.3.1.8 If the cause of death is such that the medical examiner decides not to
respond to the scene, obtain instructions from him/her as to removal of the body;
6300.3.1.9 Secure the personal property and residence of the deceased, if
necessary.
6300.3.1.10 Prepare and submit an incident report in FBR containing the facts of
the case and the details and conclusions of the investigation.

6300.4 MEDICAL EXAMINER CASES
6300.4.1 The medical examiner is required to investigate cases of death under the
following circumstances:
6300.4.1.1 Death occurs as a result of suicide, violence, or casualty.
6300.4.1.2 Death happens suddenly when the deceased was in apparent good
health, when unattended by a physician.
6300.4.1.3 Death occurs in a suspicious or unusual manner.

6300.5 REMOVAL OF BODIES OF DECEASED PERSONS

Natural Causes

6300.5.1 In cases of non-suspicious death where the deceased person's physician
has agreed to sign the death certificate, removal of the body is the responsibility of
the deceased person's survivors.
6300.5.2 Deputies shall provide reasonable assistance to the surviving family in
arranging transportation.
6300.5.3 If one or more of the following problems exist, the investigating deputy
may call the Medical Examiner to authorize removal of the decedent to a funeral
home.
6300.5.3.1 The next of kin cannot be located or is not available;
6300.5.3.2 No one will assume responsibility for the decedent.

Medical Examiner Cases

6300.5.4 In all cases of death requiring an investigation by the Medical Examiner,
the body may not be removed from the scene without the Medical Examiner's
permission.
6300.5.4.1 Such permission may be requested and obtained via telephone in cases where the body constitutes a public nuisance and criminal homicide has been ruled out.

6300.5.4.2 In such cases the investigating deputy shall inform the Medical Examiner where the body has been taken, if not already so instructed by the Medical Examiner.

6300.5.5 When the Medical Examiner orders the body transported to the morgue, he/she shall arrange for transportation.

6300.5.6 The investigating deputy’s FBR report shall indicate the names of the persons who transport the body to the morgue, and their place of employment.

6300.5.7 If the Medical Examiner fails to arrange transportation, the investigating deputy or, if necessary, the supervisor shall re-contact and coordinate transportation with a local funeral home.

6300.6 RESPONSE TO HCDC INCIDENT

6300.6.1 Upon determining that an inmate is in cardiac arrest, the responding correctional deputy(s) shall:

6300.6.1.1 Follow HCDC protocols;

6300.6.1.2 Initiate CPR efforts;

6300.6.1.3 Immediately remove all inmates from the housing in which the incident occurred.

6300.6.1.4 If the victim is deceased, the location of the incident shall be declared a crime scene and a correctional deputy shall be posted at the entrance of the housing unit to ensure no ingress/egress unless authorized.

6300.6.2 Patrol shall respond to the HCDC and handle the preliminary death investigation report in FBR.

6300.6.3 CID shall be notified regardless of the circumstances.

6300.6.4 Once disposition of the body has been determined, the protocol listed above shall be followed.

6300.6.5 CID will contact Office of Professional Standards

CALEA Reference: 41.2.4, 42.2.3