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Sheriff

HARFORD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE OPERATIONAL POLICY

Unattended and Sudden Death Investigations

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| Distribution: | All Personnel | Policy Number: | OPS 1207 | | |
| Responsible Unit: | Criminal Investigations Division | Rescinds: | MAN 6300 | | |
| Original Issued Date: | 1/13/22 | Revision #: | 2 | Latest Revision Date: | 11/25/25 |
| Latest Required Review was Completed: | | 1/3/25 | Next Review Due: | 1/13/28 | |

1. Purpose

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

2. Policy

The HCSO will work collaboratively with other public safety entities to ensure that investigations are fully conducted.

3. 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 and 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 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.

4. Procedures

A. Calls for Service

1. HCSO deputies will respond to calls for cardiac arrests, sudden deaths, and suspicious death calls for service as dispatched.
2. Once a cardiac arrest is received, a deputy will remain on scene until medical transport of the victim or until cessation of resuscitation efforts.

3. Once efforts at resuscitation have ceased, deputies will handle the call as a death investigation.
4. If notified by EMS or other medical personnel that there is a suspicious circumstance, deputies will handle the call as a death investigation.
5. EMS providers may pronounce the death of a patient when one or more of the following criteria have been met:
 - a. Decapitation;
 - b. Rigor mortis;
 - c. Decomposition;
 - d. Dependent lividity;
 - e. Pulseless, apneic patient with an injury not compatible with life; or
 - f. Once the EMS provider has terminated resuscitation per the Termination of Resuscitation protocol.

B. Initial Response

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 will contact the physician, explain the circumstances, and determine if the physician will certify the cause of death within 24 hours.
2. If the attending physician will not sign the death certificate or cannot be contacted within a reasonable time, the investigating deputy will contact the medical examiner, explain the circumstances, and follow the medical examiner's instructions as to removal of the body.
3. If the medical examiner authorizes release of the body to the family or next of kin, the deputy will assist the family in making arrangements for removal of the body, as dictated by the circumstances.
4. The investigating deputy will prepare and submit an Incident Report in the Law Enforcement Records Management System (RMS) containing the facts of the case and the details of the investigation.

C. Investigating Deputy/Detective

1. The investigating deputy and/or detective is responsible for the following actions on all death investigations:
 - a. Secure and preserve the scene pending the arrival of a Forensic Services Unit (FSU), if required;
 - b. Assist FSU in the identification, collection, and submission of evidence, if necessary;

- c. Conduct all necessary interviews of witnesses, friends, relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances;
- d. Take written statements when possible;
- e. Obtain positive identification of the deceased based on next of kin, fingerprints, dental records, and/or personal papers found on the deceased;
- f. Complete all investigative procedures necessary to establish the cause and manner of death;
- g. Contact and brief the medical examiner, and preserve the scene pending his/her arrival, if required;
- h. 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;
- i. Make every reasonable effort to locate/contact the next of kin in order to provide notification of the deceased;
- i. If unsuccessful in locating/contacting next of kin, the investigating deputy and/or detective will contact the HCSO Criminal Investigations Division (CID) to continue the next of kin notification process.
- j. Secure the personal property and residence of the deceased, if necessary; and
- k. Prepare and submit an incident report in the RMS containing the facts of the case and the details and conclusions of the investigation.
 - i. The incident report will also document the results and status of the next of kin notification process, as applicable.

D. Medical Examiner Cases

1. The medical examiner is required to investigate cases of death under the following circumstances:
 - a. Death occurs as a result of suicide, violence, or casualty;
 - b. Death happens suddenly when the deceased was in apparent good health, when unattended by a physician; or
 - c. Death occurs in a suspicious or unusual manner.

E. Removal of Bodies of Deceased Persons

1. Natural Causes

- a. 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.
- b. Deputies will provide reasonable assistance to the surviving family in arranging transportation.
- c. 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:
 - i. The next of kin cannot be located or is not available; or
 - ii. No one will assume responsibility for the decedent.

2. Medical Examiner Cases

- a. 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.
 - i. 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.
 - ii. In such cases the investigating deputy will inform the Medical Examiner where the body has been taken, if not already so instructed by the Medical Examiner.
- b. When the Medical Examiner orders the body transported to the morgue, they will arrange for transportation.
- c. The investigating deputy's Incident Report will indicate the names of the persons who transport the body to the morgue, and their place of employment.
- d. If the Medical Examiner fails to arrange transportation, the investigating deputy or, if necessary, the supervisor will re-contact and coordinate transportation with a local funeral home.

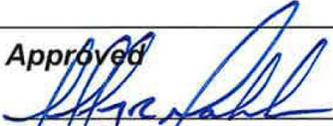
F. Response to the Harford County Detention Center (HCDC)

1. Upon determining that an inmate is in cardiac arrest, the responding correctional deputy(s) will:
 - a. Follow HCDC protocols;
 - b. Initiate resuscitative efforts;
 - c. Immediately remove all inmates from the housing area in which the incident occurred; and
 - d. If the victim is deceased, the location of the incident will be declared a crime scene and a correctional deputy will be posted at the entrance of the housing unit to ensure no ingress/egress unless authorized.
2. Patrol will respond to the HCDC and handle the preliminary death investigation report in RMS.

3. CID will be notified regardless of the circumstances.
4. Once disposition of the body has been determined, the protocol listed above will be followed.
5. CID will contact Office of Professional Standards.

5. Summary of Changes

- A. On 01/3/25 the scheduled 3-year policy review was conducted and the following edit was made:
1. Removed text reference under Section 4.A requiring deaths that occurred in situations where medical interventions by deputies were unsuccessful or medical interventions did not occur will be reported immediately to the on-duty supervisor, and, the requirements set forth in policy [OPS 0104](#) Response to Police-Involved Deaths will be followed.
 - a. This reference was removed from the policy as the Maryland Independent Investigations Division (IID) is no longer notified regarding deaths involving medical intervention only, and deaths involving traffic crashes are covered under [OPS 0104](#) Section K.
- B. On 11/25/25 the following revisions were made under Section 4.C.1, Investigating Deputy/Detective:
1. Section 4.C.1(i): Make every reasonable effort to locate/contact the next of kin in order to provide notification of the deceased.
 2. Section 4.C.1.i(i): If unsuccessful in locating/contacting next of kin, the investigating deputy and/or detective will contact the HCSO Criminal Investigations Division (CID) to continue the next of kin notification process.
 3. Section 4.C.1.k(i): The incident report will also document the results and status of the next of kin notification process, as applicable.

Approved

JEFFREY R. GAHLER
SHERIFF
DATE 12-11-25