

First Responder's Guide  
For  
Death Scenes

Fairfield County Coroner's Office

Dr. Brian Varney  
Coroner

## Coroner's Authority per Ohio Revised Code

The authority of the Coroner and his/her designee comes from the Ohio Revised Code Section 313. The most pertinent sections that apply to the First Responder are:

### **313.11 Unlawfully disturbing a body.**

(A) No person, without an order from the coroner, any deputy coroner, or an investigator or other person designated by the coroner as having authority to issue an order under this section, shall purposely remove or disturb the body of any person who has died in the manner described in section 313.12 of the Revised Code, or purposely and without such an order disturb the clothing or any article upon or near such a body or any of the possessions that the coroner has a duty to store under section 313.14 of the Revised Code.

1. Area undisturbed

RC 313.11 gives a coroner control over the area "near the body" at the scene of an unexplained death; the extent of such area and the duration of such control are within the coroner's discretion. OAG 88-035

2. Order

Evidence found at the scene of an unexplained death does not insure to the province of law enforcement after the coroner makes his initial observation of evidence on or near the body; RC 313.11 requires that everyone, including law enforcement officers, receive permission from the coroner before removing or disturbing the body or evidence found on or near the body. OAG 88-035.

When a person has died by violence, suicide or the like a coroner in determining the cause of death, has control of the area where the body is found. A person must have an order from the coroner before disturbing the body, clothing, or any other article on or near the body. OAG 80-091

### **313.12 Notice to coroner of violent, suspicious, unusual or sudden death.**

(A) When any person dies as a result of criminal or other violent means, by casualty, by suicide, or in any suspicious or unusual manner, when any person, including a child under two years of age, dies suddenly when in apparent good health, or when any person with a developmental disability dies regardless of the circumstances, the physician called in attendance, or any member of an ambulance service, emergency squad, or law enforcement agency who obtains knowledge thereof arising from the person's duties, shall immediately notify the office of the coroner of the known facts concerning the time, place, manner, and circumstances of the death, and any other information that is required pursuant to sections 313.01 to 313.22 of the Revised Code. In such cases, if a request is made for cremation, the funeral director called in attendance shall immediately notify the coroner.

(B) As used in this section, “development disability” has the same meaning as in section 5123.01 of the Revised Code.

**313.211 Powers of coroner regarding dangerous drugs.**

The coroner may secure, catalog, record, and, with the approval of the prosecuting attorney, destroy any dangerous drugs found at the scene of an investigation the coroner conducts, if the dangerous drugs are no longer needed for investigative or scientific purposes.

**I. Control of the scene**

A physician holding a current certificate to practice medicine or surgery or osteopathic medicine and surgery issued under section 4731.14 or 4731.29 of the Revised Code may pronounce a person dead without personally examining the body of the deceased only if a competent observer has recited the facts of the deceased’s present medical condition to the physician and the physician is satisfied that death has occurred.

For the purposes of this rule, a **competent observer** shall mean one of the following:

1. A licensed practical nurse
2. EMT-Basic
3. EMT-Intermediate
4. EMT-Paramedic
5. Chiropractor
6. An individual authorized to pronounce
7. Coroner’s Investigator

Until the victim is declared deceased the scene is in control of the agency responsible for providing medical care.

A complete and thorough death investigation requires the teamwork of several agencies. All agencies involved have duties to act as prescribed in the Ohio Revised Code. The following types of scenes are mentioned not to highlight who is in charge but to remind all that we all have a job to do and should work together.

**Natural Death Scene:** When EMS has declared a person deceased and there are no obvious or suspicious circumstances, and after EMS has relayed their findings to the Law Enforcement agency on scene with jurisdiction, then the EMS may return to service. The law enforcement agency must contact the decedent’s primary care physician and/or coroner for release of the body.

**Violent, suspicious, unusual or sudden unexpected death:** Control of the scene belongs to the law enforcement agency with jurisdiction. In these cases EMS will probably have awaited law enforcement to secure the scene before arriving. Please restrict entry into the scene to declare a death to one EMS

personnel. If that person enters and determines that resuscitation should be attempted, then call the rest of the crew in for assistance. Do not cover these deceased bodies unless they are within public view. Anytime you cover a body with a sheet or blanket you are introducing fibers/hairs that could contaminate the body and potential crime scene. This can also allow valuable trace evidence to be lost. It is best not to cover a body at all. If the scene is an outside scene it is far better to shield the body from view rather than cover it.

**Fire scene:** Control belongs to the fire department until the fire is out and the scene is deemed safe. The fire investigation belongs to the fire department until evidence of a crime or death has been discovered then law enforcement has the authority to be involved as well as the State Fire Marshal's Office. The coroner's office has control of the body and immediate area and will cooperate with all involved.

Remember, if you (EMS) declare a person deceased from anything other than natural death you must leave airways, IV's, electrodes, resuscitation trash etc. in place. Do not clean up. You can take monitor wires. Always check your shoes and kit bottoms to make sure there is nothing stuck to them.

## **II. How to contact the coroner**

EMS and/or law enforcement on scene can contact their dispatch via radio and their dispatch will contact Fairfield County dispatch at 740-652-2864. Fairfield County dispatch will need a name and phone number at which our investigator can contact you. We strive to make contact within ten minutes. Fairfield County dispatch has the current call list for our office. **Do not** attempt to call our office directly as it is not under 24 hour manning. However, our investigators are on call 24/7. For non-emergency contact of our office call 740-652-2865.

E-mail: [coroner@fairfieldcountyohio.gov](mailto:coroner@fairfieldcountyohio.gov)

Website: [www.co.fairfield.oh.us/coroner/](http://www.co.fairfield.oh.us/coroner/)

## **III. What information the death investigator will require**

Below is a list of information that the investigator will ask when you call.

1. Name, age, date of birth, SSN, address of the death, victim's address if different and why decedent is at this address.
2. Location of body ie. in bed, on floor in living room, on toilet, in garage, etc.
3. Time found and by whom
4. Time declared dead and by whom
5. Last known alive. Any verbalized or obvious complaints.
6. Circumstances surrounding the death.
7. Past medical history and primary care physician name and phone number
8. Medications and whether or not it appears medications are being taken correctly by checking fill date, number of pills filled and number of pills remaining.

9. Next of kin: Name, address, phone number. Have they been notified?
10. Funeral home chosen by NOK.
11. Any additional information you feel may be required.

#### **IV. Special EMS circumstances**

##### **Medical/Natural death:**

If your victim is declared dead by you in your vehicle after leaving a scene and prior to arrival at the hospital you must immediately contact medical control and follow their instructions. DO NOT CONTINUE TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.

##### **Trauma:**

If your victim is declared dead by you in your vehicle after leaving a scene and prior to arrival at the hospital you must stop and immediately contact the coroner. It is EMS's responsibility to contact the coroner immediately under the Ohio Revised Code. The Investigator on call will direct you as to how and where to proceed. Most likely you will be instructed to go directly to the hospital morgue. You must contact hospital security for assistance at the morgue. Be sure to contact the emergency room so any arriving family members can be briefed.

Be prepared to answer the questions from the above Section III.

**(\*To avoid the above situations you should continue resuscitation into the emergency room.)**

##### **Hospice:**

When EMS declares a hospice patient deceased, the scene should be turned over to law enforcement as in any other home death or if the hospice representative arrives first, then to the hospice representative. Be aware that patients under hospice care can still die due to homicide, suicide or accident requiring contact of law enforcement and coroner.

##### **Nursing Home:**

When EMS declares a person deceased in a nursing facility and there are no signs of foul play, neglect or other special circumstances the scene can be left to the nursing facility personnel and law enforcement need not be contacted. Again remember these persons can still die due to homicide, suicide or accident requiring contact of law enforcement and coroner.

##### **Suspicious Deaths:**

If you are called to a scene under normal medical response and suspect a death to not be natural you can proceed in two ways. If you can safely do so, remove everyone from the scene including FD and EMS personnel and secure the scene until arrival of law enforcement. If you feel the scene is not safe **leave immediately** and meet law enforcement in a safe area.

### **Suicide scenes:**

A suicide scene should be protected as if a homicide. A suicide is only a suicide after the investigation is completed by the detectives and coroner. The police officer, deputy and EMS personnel only have to deal with the family for a very short period of time. The detective and coroner sometimes deal with these families for years to come. Maintaining the scene in a pristine manner is required as in a homicide.

### **Sudden Unexplained Infant Deaths:**

These are automatic scene responses from the coroner's office. These scenes are very critical and can hold very valuable information as to the cause and manner of death. We ask that the body and the scene be secured until arrival of law enforcement. Please use compassion and explain to the family that this is routine and important for us to be able to answer their questions. This is not meant to be accusatory of any wrongdoing by anyone involved. We ask that you not allow the family to hold the infant. This is a difficult thing to do. Please use compassion and explain we will allow holding if at all possible after the investigation. There is no evidence of any benefit to a family of transporting an obviously deceased infant. If there are obvious signs of death please refrain from transport. We understand these are very emotional scenes. You must remember that transporting an obviously deceased infant may prevent us from being able to give the family answers they need.

### **Drug Overdose:**

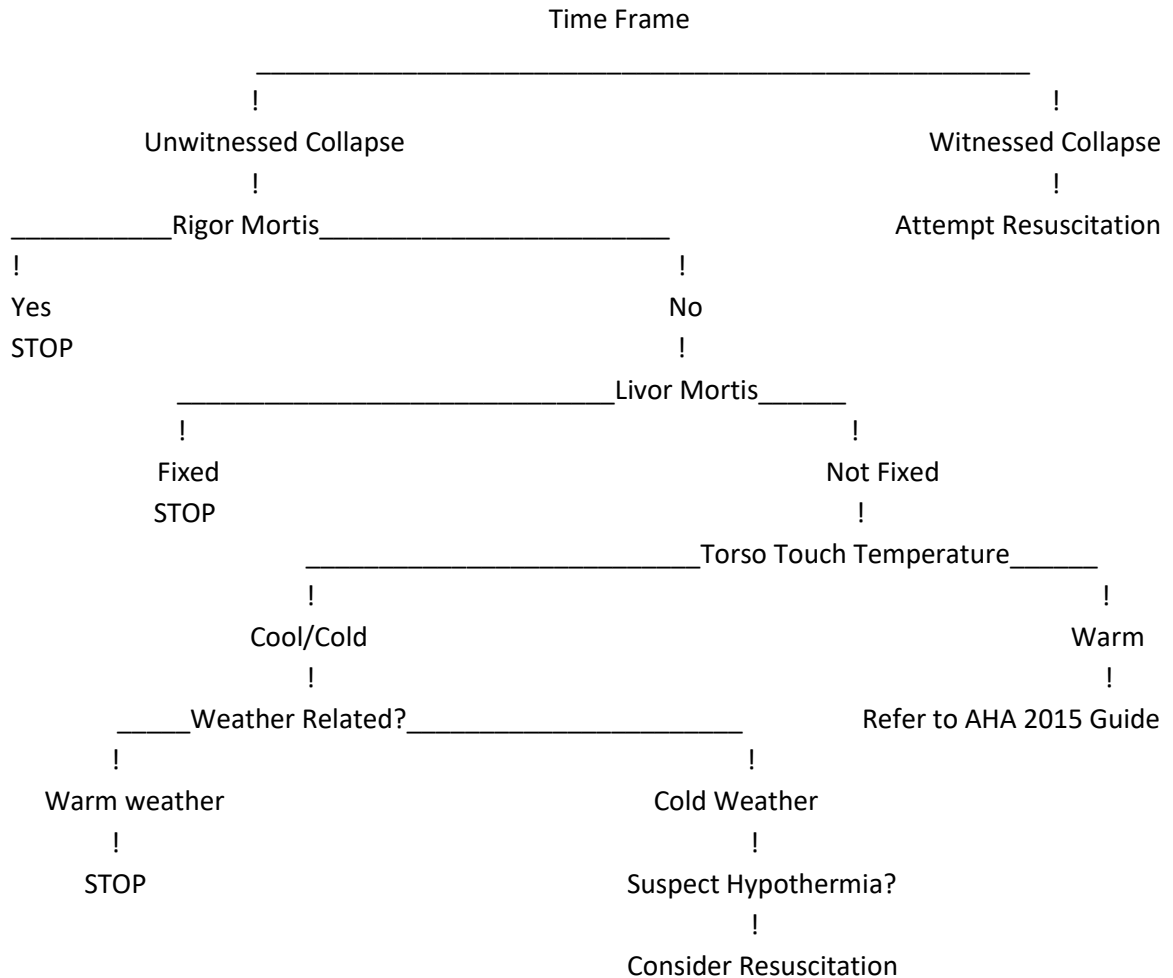
These are all potential crime scenes and should be treated as such. Protect the scene until it can be turned over to law enforcement.

**DO NOT SEARCH POCKETS FOR IDENTIFICATION IN ANY CASE THAT IS NOT CONSIDERED TO BE NATURAL. Advise law enforcement of information you need and the coroner's office will provide that information ASAP.**

EMT-B Death Decision Chart

The American Heart Association 2015 Guidelines state three criteria for termination of resuscitation efforts. These are:

1. Arrest NOT witnessed by EMS personnel
2. No spontaneous return of pulse
3. No AED shock advised



These steps can be taken with minimal movement of a body.

Rigor Mortis is the stiffening of the joints.

Livor Mortis is movement of the blood cells to the lowest point of the body.

Torso temperature is by touch. Do not check extremities.

Decomposing body is an obvious death and over-rides all the above.

## **V. Special Law Enforcement Circumstances**

If the death scene is an obvious crime scene, possible suicide or accident, please request the coroner be notified at the same time you request detectives. Dispatchers are required by ORC to immediately contact the coroner when requested to do so.

If the death is of natural causes you should contact the decedent's primary care physician prior to contacting the coroner. Be prepared to answer the questions in the above section for the physician as well as the coroner.

**Scene preservation is secondary only to scene safety/security:**

If the scene is safe and you are confident the person is deceased please take a few photographs of the decedent prior to EMS entering. DO NOT MOVE OR REMOVE weapons unless there is a safety issue to address. EMS requesting the weapon to be moved is not a safety issue unless they decide to attempt resuscitation. Please escort one person of the EMS unit through a crime, suicide or accident scene (other than MVA) to make the declaration of death. If this one EMS member feels resuscitation should be attempted, only then allow the rest of the crew to enter to assist him/her. The dynamics of a scene where there are live victims as well as deceased victims can be overwhelming. EMS may enter an accident scene prior to your arrival. Before releasing the EMS crew be sure to ascertain any and all things they have touched or moved. If EMS declares a person deceased from anything other than natural death they must leave airways, IV's, electrodes, resuscitation trash etc. in place. Do not allow any clean up. They can take monitor wires. Always check their shoes and kit bottoms to make sure there is nothing stuck to them. Do not cover deceased bodies unless they are within public view such as outside.

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**Drug Overdose:**

These are all potential crime scenes and should be treated as such. Protect the scene until arrival of detectives/coroner.

## **VI. Scene Investigation**

As a first responder, your responsibility is not to investigate the scene but to recognize the signs that make a scene a potential crime scene.



What makes a scene suspicious? Gut feelings are important to us. As you get experienced in death scenes, you will be able to recognize a normal scene from one that appears to be suspicious. We would rather be called to a suspicious scene that turns out not to be rather than miss one that is. Here is a partial list of signs/clues:

- a. Unexplained delay in requesting help
- b. The scene appears to have been cleaned or staged
- c. The story being told does not match what you are seeing
- d. Inappropriate behavior of family/friends
- e. Signs of struggle
- f. Known prior law enforcement activity at the location
- g. Gut feelings

If you are suspicious protect the scene and refer to detectives/coroner.

Anytime you cover a body with a sheet or blanket you are introducing fibers/hairs that could contaminate the body and potential crime scene. This can also allow valuable trace evidence to be lost. It is best not to cover a body at all. If the scene is an outside scene it is far better to shield the body from view rather than cover it. Is the body truly in the public view? Have you made your scene large enough?

**How to report changes to a body after death:** Changes occur to the body that will assist us in giving an estimation of the time of death. If we come to the scene we will document these changes. If we are going to release the body after a phone conversation with you we will want you to describe what you see and feel.

1. Rigor mortis: This is the stiffening of the joints. Please document what joints are affected and check a small joint such as a finger as well as a large one such as a knee. If the rigor defies gravity the body has been moved. Document who moved it and why.
2. Livor mortis: This is the settling of red blood cells to the bottom of the body as it lays. Upper surfaces should be pale and lower portions should be deeply colored. As you move the victim you should note an absence of this discoloration where the body has contacted a surface. Color may be important also.
3. Temperature by touch: Feel the torso top and underneath. Document warm, cool or cold. Do not check arms and legs as they cool faster than the torso.
4. Decomposition: There are many stages of decomposition. We will strive to visit the scene of a decomposing body. Document what you see and smell.

## **VII. What happens to the body**

The coroner's investigator will determine whether or not to release the body to a funeral home designated by the next of kin or have the body transported to the morgue for autopsy. We do not autopsy every "Coroner's Case". That decision is on a case by case basis. If the next of kin cannot make

a decision on a funeral home to use or if next of kin cannot be found in a timely manner the coroner's investigator will instruct you how to proceed.

## **VII. Summary**

These guidelines are meant to provide you the first responder with information to assist you in making decisions at a death scene. These guidelines are not meant to replace your agency's policies and procedures but to compliment them. If you are faced with a situation that is not covered by these guideline or your agencies policies and procedures a coroner's investigator is available 24/7 through Fairfield County dispatch at 740-652-2864.