

On behalf of the Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner's Office (C.C.M.E.O.), may we offer our deepest sympathy to you and your family during this difficult time.

In order to assist you, it is our hope that the information contained in this pamphlet will provide answers to some of the questions and concerns that you may have.

#### **1. Why is the Medical Examiner's Office involved?**

Ohio law requires the County Medical Examiner to investigate the circumstances and determine the cause and manner of death of all deaths that are:

- Sudden, when a person is in apparent good health
- Not under the care of a physician
- Suspicious, unusual or unexplained
- The result of violence
- Unlawful or due to criminal neglect

A body also may be brought to the Office of the Medical Examiner if the identity of the deceased or of the next of kin is unknown. The body is retained by this office for a reasonable period of time before interment at a cemetery or until the next of kin can be located by the Police Department and identification established and funeral arrangements made.

#### **2. Why must the body of the deceased person be identified?**

Identification is necessary in order to establish that the person reported to C.C.M.E.O. as having died is, in fact, that person, and to complete the certificate of death.

#### **3. What is the identification procedure?**

There are seven methods to identifying an unidentified body, which includes:

- Visual identification
- Fingerprinting
- Dental comparison
- X-ray comparison
- Mechanical implants or devices
- Anthropology
- DNA

It is not necessary to come to C.C.M.E.O. to identify the deceased. In the event that visual identification is required, you will be notified by the Medical Examiner.

#### **4. How long is the wait to make a identification?**

Depending on the method used to identify the deceased it could be anywhere from days to weeks (rarely months). Each case is different but most are done within a few days.

#### **5. What is an autopsy?**

An autopsy is a systematic examination of the body of a deceased person by a qualified pathologist. Performance of an autopsy does not interfere with having the body viewed at the funeral. The body is inspected for the presence of disease or injury; specimens of the vital organs and/or body fluids may be taken for microscopic, chemical, or other tests.

A written record is made of the autopsy finding including the microscopic and laboratory test, and the reports of consultants. Copies of these reports are available upon request by next of kin or other authorized individuals.

#### **6. Why might an autopsy be performed?**

*NOTE: Autopsies are not performed on all cases.*

Autopsies are routinely performed to determine the cause and manner of death on most cases listed in section 1. Autopsies are not routinely performed in case where there is significant medical history, the death appears to be from natural causes and there is not evidence of injury or foul play.

In situations where the death appears to be the result of natural causes and/or no foul play is involved, one can request no autopsy be performed. Be aware the autopsy may be important as far as insurance is concerned or where there may be an undetected disease process which may have an impact on other family members. If there are doubts, please talk it over with other family members before a final joint decision is reached. C.C.M.E.O. will try to honor all such requests where possible.

In cases where the actual cause of death is unclear or due to unusual circumstances, such as homicide, suicide, or where concerns of foul play are raised, an autopsy can be ordered, by law, by the Medical Examiner. If family disagrees with the Medical Examiner regarding an autopsy then the family will be provided 48 hours to hire an attorney, if they desire, and to present their objections to a Judge who will determine whether an

autopsy will be performed. Objections to autopsy which are not based on religious beliefs have no standing in the law. (ORC. 313.131)

#### **7. Will I still be able to have an open casket service if an autopsy is performed?**

**YES** – Autopsies are performed in a professional manner with dignity and respect that does not interfere with the viewing. If a person could be viewed before autopsy, they should be viewable afterward.

#### **8. How long will it take before my loved one is released from the Medical Examiner's Jurisdiction?**

Depending on what time of day the Medical Examiner's Office is notified and takes jurisdiction, the medical information available and the circumstances surrounding the death, the body may be released the same day or later on the next day. In case of suspicious deaths or deaths that require further investigation, your loved one's remains may be held for additional time and will be released as promptly as possible.

#### **9. Is viewing or visitation allowed while the body is under the Medical Examiner's jurisdiction?**

The Medical Examiner's Office and the hospital facility are not designed to handle bereaved relatives. Only in identification purposes is viewing of the remains allowed on a limited basis. Arrangements for viewing should be made with your funeral director.

#### **10. Who contacts the Funeral Home?**

Once you have selected a funeral home, please let them know that the body is under the Jurisdiction of C.C.M.E.O.. The funeral home will call the Medical Examiner's Office as soon as possible to inform us of your choice.

#### **11. Where is the deceased's personal property held?**

If you have any questions regarding personal property either call C.C.M.E.O. and speak to a staff member or ask the staff member when you are being interviewed. C.C.M.E.O. has a Property Department which on occasions receives personal property from the deceased.

If the death is a homicide, personal property may be held

by the law enforcement jurisdiction handling the case until the close of the criminal prosecution.

## 12. How do I obtain a certified copy of the death certificate?

The Medical Examiner's Office does not issue copies of the death certificate. Copies can be requested from the funeral home when arrangements are made. As a courtesy to the family, funeral homes may offer to obtain the certificates from the Health or Vital Statistics Department. The Health or Vital Statistics Department charges a fee for each copy obtained and any additional copies may be obtained directly from them.

## 13. When will the autopsy report be ready and how do I obtain a copy?

Autopsy reports are generally available in about 3 months (or possibly more) from the date of death. The results of the Toxicology and other studies can take longer. Please submit your request in writing to the C.C.M.E.O.

*NOTE: The availability of reports generated may take longer depending on the case circumstances.*

## 14. What does "Pending" mean on a Death Certificate?

Occasionally additional information, more extensive testing or further studies are required in order to accurately determine a cause and manner of death. A death certificate with "pending" as the cause of death still allows your family to make immediate funeral arrangements. The final death certificate will be issued upon completion of the investigation.

## 15. What should I do now?

As soon as possible a funeral home must be selected to handle funeral arrangements for the deceased. When you contact the funeral director, advise them that the deceased is under the C.C.M.E.O.'s jurisdiction. The funeral director will, in turn, contact our office and make arrangements to pick up your loved one.

The C.C.M.E.O. has someone on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Please call (216) 721-5610 if you have any questions or if we can assist you further.

Dealing with the pain at the loss of a loved one is difficult. Services to help with the grieving process are available. Your primary care provider is your best first point of contact. Some other resources are listed below and are available to all citizens of Cuyahoga County.

The Cuyahoga County Board of Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS) is the designated agency for providing assistance to residents regarding their mental health and well-being. Persons seeking assistance with their grief and loss of a loved one should feel free to contact ADAMHS for referrals:



**ADAMHSCC Board**  
2012 W. 25th Street, 6th Floor  
Cleveland, OH 44113  
216.241.3400

Anyone with urgent needs should not hesitate to contact the following for immediate assistance



Both numbers (216.623-6888 and 2-1-1) can provide immediate assistance in case of an immediate crisis. If an actual emergency exists, call 9-1-1.

Other agencies operating within Cuyahoga County, with multiple locations, can provide longer term and assistance at little to no cost to those persons dealing with loss and depression:

Cornerstone of Hope is dedicated to providing support, education, and hope for the grieving.

**Cornerstone of Hope**  
5905 Brecksville Road  
Independence, OH 44131  
p. 216.524.HOPE(4673)  
f. 216.524.3743



Email: [support@cornerstoneofhope.org](mailto:support@cornerstoneofhope.org)

Hospice of the Western Reserve's Elisabeth Severance Prentiss Bereavement Center is a community based grief support program.



**ES Prentiss Bereavement Center**  
19201 Villaview Road  
Cleveland, Ohio 44119-3064  
Phone: 216.486.6838  
Fax: 216.481.4987



# Information for Family and Friends

**Thomas Gilson, M.D.**  
Medical Examiner

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[www.coroner.cuyahogacounty.us](http://www.coroner.cuyahogacounty.us)