

Death Investigation

328.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for situations where officers initially respond to and investigate the circumstances of a deceased person.

It is the policy of the Fresno State Police Department to respond to, document, and investigate incidents where a person is deceased. Investigations involving the death of a person, including deaths from natural causes, accidents, workplace incidents, suicide, and homicide, shall be initiated, conducted, and properly documented.

Some causes of death may not be readily apparent, and some cases differ substantially from what they appeared to be initially. The thoroughness of death investigations and use of appropriate resources and evidence gathering techniques is critical.

328.2 POLICY

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328.3 INVESTIGATION CONSIDERATIONS

Emergency medical services shall be called in all suspected death cases unless the death is obvious (e.g., decapitated, decomposed).

A supervisor shall be notified as soon as possible to assist and provide appropriate personnel and resources. The on-scene supervisor should determine whether follow-up investigation is required and notify the Investigations Division Commander as necessary. The Watch Commander will make notification to command staff in accordance with the Major Incident Notification Policy.

328.3.1 REPORTING

All incidents involving a death shall be documented on the appropriate form.

328.3.2 CORONER REQUEST

Government Code § 27491 and Health and Safety Code § 102850 direct the Coroner to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner, and cause of certain deaths. The Coroner shall be called in any of the following cases:

- (a) Unattended deaths (No physician in attendance or during the continued absence of the attending physician. This also includes all deaths outside hospitals and nursing care facilities.)
- (b) Deaths where the deceased has not been attended by either a physician or a registered nurse who is a member of a hospice care interdisciplinary team, as defined by Health and Safety Code § 1746, in the 20 days prior to death

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- (c) Deaths where the physician is unable to state the cause of death. Unwillingness does not apply. This includes all sudden, unexpected, and unusual deaths, and fetal deaths when the underlying cause is unknown.
- (d) Known or suspected homicide
- (e) Known or suspected suicide (including suicide where the deceased has a history of being victimized by domestic violence)
- (f) Deaths involving any criminal action or suspicion of a criminal act. This includes child and dependent adult negligence and abuse.
- (g) Deaths related to or following known or suspected self-induced or criminal abortion
- (h) Deaths associated with a known or alleged rape or crime against nature
- (i) Deaths following an accident or injury (primary or contributory). This includes deaths known or suspected as resulting (in whole or in part) from or related to accident or injury, either old or recent.
- (j) Deaths from drowning, fire, hanging, gunshot, stabbing, cutting, starvation, exposure, alcoholism, drug addiction, strangulation, or aspiration
- (k) Deaths from accidental poisoning (e.g., food, chemical, drug, therapeutic agents)
- (l) Deaths from occupational diseases or occupational hazards
- (m) Deaths from known or suspected contagious disease and constituting a public hazard
- (n) All deaths in operating rooms and all deaths where a patient has not fully recovered from an anesthetic, whether in surgery, recovery room, or elsewhere
- (o) Deaths that occur in prison or while under sentence. This includes all in-custody and police-involved deaths.
- (p) All deaths of unidentified persons
- (q) All deaths of state hospital patients
- (r) Suspected Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) deaths
- (s) All deaths where the patient is comatose throughout the period of the physician's attendance. This includes patients that are admitted to hospitals unresponsive and expire without regaining consciousness.

The body shall not be disturbed or moved from the position or place of death without permission of the Coroner.

328.3.3 SEARCHING DEAD BODIES

- (a) The Coroner or a designee is generally the only person permitted to search a body known to be dead from any of the circumstances set forth in Government Code § 27491. The only exception is that an officer is permitted to search the body of a person killed in a traffic collision for the limited purpose of locating an anatomical donor card. If such a donor card is located, the Coroner or a designee shall be promptly notified (Government Code § 27491.3).

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- (b) The Coroner, with the permission of the Department, may take property, objects, or articles found on the deceased or in the immediate vicinity of the deceased that may be necessary for conducting an investigation to determine the identity of the deceased or the cause or manner of death (Government Code § 27491.3).
- (c) Should exigent circumstances indicate to an officer that any other search of a known dead body is warranted prior to the arrival of the Coroner or a designee, the investigating officer should first obtain verbal consent from the Coroner or a designee (Government Code § 27491.2).
- (d) Whenever reasonably possible, a witness, preferably a relative to the deceased or a member of the household, should be requested to remain nearby the scene and available to the officer pending the arrival of the Coroner or a designee. The name and address of this person shall be included in the narrative of the death report.
- (e) Whenever personal effects are removed from the body of the deceased by the Coroner or a designee, a receipt shall be obtained. This receipt shall be attached to the death report.

328.3.4 SUSPECTED HOMICIDE

If the initially assigned officer suspects that the death involves a homicide or other suspicious circumstances, the officer shall take steps to protect the scene. The Investigations Unit shall be notified to determine the possible need for an investigator to respond to the scene.

If the on-scene supervisor, through consultation with the Watch Commander or Detective Unit supervisor, is unable to determine the manner of death, the investigation shall proceed as though it is a homicide.

The investigator assigned to investigate a homicide or death that occurred under suspicious circumstances may, with the approval of their supervisor, request the Coroner to conduct physical examinations and tests, and to provide a report.

328.3.5 EMPLOYMENT-RELATED DEATHS OR INJURIES

Any sworn member of this agency who responds to a death, serious illness, or serious injury and determines that it has occurred as a result of an accident at or in connection with the victim's employment shall ensure that the nearest office of Cal-OSHA is notified by telephone immediately or as soon as practicable with all pertinent information (8 CCR 342(b)).

328.3.6 DEATHS OF VICTIMS WITH AN IDENTIFIABLE HISTORY OF VICTIMIZED DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Prior to making any findings as to the manner and cause of death of a deceased individual with an identifiable history of being victimized by domestic violence, investigating officers should consider factors identified in Penal Code § 679.07 (e.g., premature or untimely death, partner wanting to end relationship, scene gives appearance of death due to suicide or accident) and proceed with the investigation according to the code's requirements.

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328.4 UNIDENTIFIED DEAD BODY

If the identity of a dead body cannot be established, the handling officer will request from the Coroner a unique identifying number for the body. The number shall be included in any report.

328.5 DEATH NOTIFICATION

When reasonably practicable, and if not handled by the Coroner's Office, notification to the next-of-kin of the deceased person shall be made, in person, by the officer assigned to the incident. If the next-of-kin lives in another jurisdiction, a law enforcement official from that jurisdiction shall be requested to make the personal notification.

If a deceased person has been identified as a missing person, this department shall attempt to locate family members and inform them of the death and location of the deceased missing person's remains. All efforts to locate and notify family members shall be recorded in appropriate reports.