

Pennsylvania State Coroners Association
Administrative Guideline

This guideline was developed as a means to help Coroners and Staff with the death of a known individual, such as a loved one, friend, co-worker or acquaintance.

First, we need to define the following: Standard, Guideline, and Best Practice

A **Standard** is the minimum level of acceptable performance

A **Guideline or Principle** is a suggested level of performance, but not a standard

A **Best Practice** is the most rigorous level of performance and is based on current knowledge without resource limitations. (Shall; cannot deviate from; required)

Dealing with death on a daily basis can affect anyone in multiple ways, such as mentally, physically or both. We can experience sleepless nights, temperament changes, loss of appetite, use of drugs and/or alcohol, lack of self-worth, reporting off from work and the list can continue.

Although we investigate deaths and interact with next of kin on a daily basis, but when a death involves someone, we personally know, the death becomes personal and we need to learn to deal with the loss. Whether the death is a family member, friend or co-worker, it affects us harder than dealing with the death of an unknown individual.

We need to talk about what we are experiencing, why we feel the way we do and what we are feeling. As you know, we all grieve in different manners.

When the death involves a colleague, we need to grieve and may experience the same emotions as with the loss of a loved one. Remember, our colleagues are Co-workers, 1st Responders, Medical Personnel, Law Enforcement and more. We see and work with them daily and sometimes during the most tragic events possible. We spend more time with them than with family members. They become members of our extended family. When a death occurs, we need to heal from the loss.

As the Coroner or Office Head, we need to be ready in the event a death occurs within our office or community of an extended family member. We need to be there for our co-workers and ourselves. So, what do we do, when a death involves one of our own? We can only make a few suggestions to help you and your staff:

- Personally notify all of your staff members of the death; try not to text or email the notification, make it a personal contact.

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- If the co-worker personally knows the community member (police officer, fireman, EMT, Paramedic, etc.), do not let him/her investigate the death
- If the death involves a member of your office, ***DO NOT*** let anyone from your office investigate the death.
- Establish a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with your neighboring County Coroner's Office to conduct the investigation. Remember family! Deputize the member from the neighboring Coroner's Office (can be done in advanced) and advised him/her not to discuss the details of the incident with members of your office. In planning ahead, you may want to discuss with your HR Officer regarding the Coroner or Deputy Coroner from the neighboring County or in most circumstances of this nature, the assisting Office may not charge or invoice your office. Having the Coroner or Deputy Coroner respond from a neighboring County, response time could become an issue, at which point, you will need to inform your local Law Enforcement, Family or any other agency involved of the delay.
- In deaths other than natural expected events, isolate your staff from the investigation, this would include the scene and autopsy if one will be performed. If an autopsy is to be scheduled, have it performed at another facility other than one you normally use. (This could be outlined in your established MOU)
- Limit access to the investigative report(s), all photographs, autopsy/toxicology reports or any other document related to the investigation. With electronic data management systems, reports and photographs can be secured with limited access. If reports are prepared in paper form, secure them away from your normal filing system. Note: You may want to consider to have the other County Coroner's Office enter the information into your system to complete the death certificate or other required reports, but the investigative report written as a word document can be locked/secured to prevent others from reading. Once all paperwork has been completed, you should secure the report and photographs from others in your office.
- Contact your Communication Center or local EMS Council and setup a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) meeting, as soon as possible, for members of your office and 1st Responders who may have been involved with the death. For co-workers, you can make it mandatory or voluntary but either way make sure every member of your staff is invited to attend. This includes you as well!
- Contact your County Administrator or Head and advise him/her of the situation and the loss to you and your office experienced. Speak directly with the Director of Human Resources and have the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) available for you and your staff, if needed.

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- Remember to take care of yourself as well. If you don't, you won't be any help to your staff, family or to yourself. Remember we are all human!
- Never be afraid to talk about your feelings! Never be afraid to call and ask for assistance! The phone is always on!
- When time permits, please notify the President and/or the Executive Director, regardless of the day or time, of the incident. This will prevent incorrect information from being circulated, as well as, we can offer our services, assistance or an avenue for communication.
- Always remember, this is only a guideline to assist you and your Office during an unforeseen incident. When establishing your MOU between another County, the parameters are between you and the other County Coroner to set and decide upon.

We are all in this together, we are here to help one another! Don't be afraid to call, even it's just to talk, vent or yell!

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