

# Pennsylvania State Coroners Association

## *Secretary/Treasurer*

*Charles E. Hall, D-ABMDI*  
6375 Basehore Road  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17050  
Phone: 717-766-6418  
Fax: 717-960-5595  
Email: coronersinfo@pacoroners.org  
Website: www.pacoroners.org



## *President*

*Timothy Warco*  
***Vice-President***  
*Scott E. Lynn*  
***Asst. Secretary/Treasurer***  
*Paul J. Sharum, D-ABMDI*  
***Solicitor***  
*Timothy G. Uhrich, Esq.*  
***Executive Director***  
*Mandy Tinkey, M.S. C.C.S.A. C.F.M.II*

## **Position Paper: Expanding Coroner and Medical Examiner Access to eVitals Death Records**

**April 30, 2025**

### **Position:**

Coroners and Medical Examiners (C/MEs) should have full access to view all electronic death records (eVitals) in their counties. This access is vital for accurate and timely death investigations, legal compliance, public safety, and effective collaboration with government agencies.

---

### **Background**

The Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS), often referred to as eVitals, is designed to streamline the death certification process. It connects funeral homes, physicians, registrars, and other stakeholders to create and certify death certificates (DCs). However, in many counties, C/MEs can only view records they are directly involved with—typically only those they create and investigate and not necessarily those they are responsible to approve for cremation authorizations.

This limited access hampers the ability of C/MEs to fulfill their statutory duties and provide critical support to public health, criminal investigations, and grieving families.

---

## **Why Full Access Is Essential**

### **1. Complete Oversight and Jurisdictional Closure**

- Full access ensures C/MEs can review all flagged death certificates in their jurisdiction, not just those referred to them.
- Allows C/MEs to confirm proper closure of cases they declined or terminated, ensuring legal and procedural accountability.

### **2. Public and Agency Inquiries**

- C/MEs receive frequent inquiries from families, friends, law enforcement, probation officers, and courts asking whether someone has died.
- Currently, if a case wasn't referred to or approved by the C/ME, there is no efficient way to confirm a death, leading to time wasted and delays in court or investigative proceedings.
  - Example: In locating next of kin, C/MEs often discover that a potential relative may have already died—without eVitals access, confirmation is delayed or impossible.

### **3. Investigative and Legal Obligations**

- Cause and manner of death are often questioned post-certification. Without access, C/MEs cannot identify reportable deaths missed by doctors (e.g., trauma, peri-operative complications, or abuse).
- C/MEs are legally required to:
  - Identify the deceased
  - Determine cause and manner of death
  - Notify next of kin
  - Approve organ and tissue recovery
  - Issue Cremation Authorizations
- Limited or no access to critical systems like JNET and restricted eVitals viewing impairs compliance with these mandates.

### **4. Missed Reportable Deaths**

- Physicians frequently misclassify deaths that should be investigated, especially in nursing homes, rehab centers, and hospitals.
- Common misstatements: "frailty," "cardiac arrest," "COPD," often obscure underlying trauma or surgical complications.
- Only cremation approvals currently trigger C/ME review; burials bypass oversight entirely, risking missed autopsies and underreporting.

## 5. Pattern Detection and Early Intervention

- With broader access, C/MEs could identify clusters of questionable deaths and investigate possible “angel of death” scenarios or negligent care patterns.
  - Example: A case involving a hip fracture resulting from abuse only came to light via an informal tip; wider access would enable proactive reviews.

## 6. Correction of Errors and System Accountability

- Physicians sometimes erroneously certify deaths that fall under C/ME jurisdiction. The current eVitals system allows flagged items an override option.
  - Example: A nursing home submitted a DC citing "subarachnoid bleed/fall." The C/ME was not notified and only became involved when a funeral director reached out.
- Without system access, the C/ME couldn't locate the DC or take corrective action promptly.
- eVitals access would allow real-time review and correction of improperly assigned certifications.

## 7. Operational Efficiency and Interagency Coordination

- Agencies rely on C/MEs to confirm deaths, even when the case was not investigated by the office.
- Access would allow confirmation and referral to the appropriate funeral home or DOH office for copies.
- Saves hours spent calling funeral homes, hospitals, or physicians to confirm whether a certificate has been signed.

## 8. Duplicate Case Detection Limitation in eVitals:

The current duplicate check function in eVitals only flags existing cases if no medical provider has interacted with the record.

- This results in C/MEs unknowingly creating duplicate death certificates—especially when a medical facility has merely completed the pronouncement section without referring the case.
- Inability to locate a record touched by a medical owner until it's referred, C/MEs cannot verify if a record already exists, undermining the purpose of duplicate prevention.

- Read-only access to view all death cases in our jurisdiction—including those owned by medical facilities—would assist to identify duplicates early, reduce abandoned records, and prevent conflicting or incorrect death information from being filed.
- This critical limitation was not addressed during training and severely impacts case integrity and workflow.

### **9. Support for Cremation Authorization and General Inquiries**

- Some fear eVitals access could reduce the need for funeral homes to send C/MEs the death certificate. However, view-only access would not allow printing or editing, so existing procedures remain intact.
- Enables C/MEs to review and close out older or unarchived cases, verify appropriate certification, and reduce unnecessary follow-ups with funeral homes.

### **10. Support for Unidentified or Unclaimed Decedents**

- C/MEs could confirm if a name was ever added to an unidentified decedent's file and determine burial or disposition, helping resolve unclaimed remains cases faster.
- Avoids long delays caused by subpoenaing records from the Department of Health.

### **11. Enhanced Data Integrity and Public Trust**

- Reviewing duplicate cases and matching them to the correct funeral home or certifier helps avoid confusion and distress for families.
- Families, agencies, and institutions view C/MEs as central authorities on death matters. Expanding access aligns with public expectations and professional responsibility.

---

### **Policy Considerations**

- Access could be view-only, preserving the integrity of the DC and minimizing misuse concerns.
- System access could include an audit trail to monitor usage and maintain HIPAA compliance.
- Training and authorization protocols can ensure access is limited to qualified investigative personnel.

---

## Conclusion

As gatekeepers of death investigations, C/MEs must have comprehensive tools to fulfill their legal, investigative, and public health responsibilities. Granting full eVitals access would:

- Improve public safety
- Enhance operational efficiency
- Reduce bureaucratic delays
- Prevent missed reportable deaths
- Bolster public trust in death investigation systems

The benefits are clear, and the risks are manageable with appropriate system controls. We urge the responsible authorities to support this critical policy improvement.

Thank you for your support and assistance.

Respectfully,  
*Mandy Tinkey*

Mandy Tinkey MFS, CCSA, CFM-II  
PSCA Executive Director