

Radio and newspaper

The job of the Coroner is to determine cause and manner of death on every deceased. The coroner determines this by any means necessary including but not limited to investigation of scene, medical records, autopsy, toxicology, communication with medical staff and an external autopsy.

In the state of Missouri, Coroners are elected officials for the county. I am currently starting my second term as the coroner for Phelps County. In addition, the coroner is not required to have a medicolegal death investigator certification but to provide this county the best of my abilities and practice coroner standards as well as statues for the state of Missouri, I have spent the last two years fulfilling all the requirements to become a medical death investigator (MDI). I am now awaiting a testing date and fully expect to pass. When I pass that test, I will be one of the very few MDIs in the State of Missouri. My deputy is a Forensic Nurse and has taken the Medicolegal Death Investigation course. She will seek testing for certification as well.

Medical Death Investigator week ended on the 29th of January and is a designated period to honor and recognize the vital contributions of professionals and allies who investigate deaths. It is truly a honor to serve this county and a passion of ours to do this job to the best of my ability by education and training about the body in death provided through conferences classes and/or online learning as well as building a network with other medical death investigators.

My deputy coroner and I are members the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME) and of the Missouri Coroners and Medical Examiners Association (MCMEA). As this profession grows, the MCMEA will soon to be a member of American Board of Medical Death Investigators (AMBDI).

So what is our role in deaths?

Unfortunately, I hear all the time that all we have to do is declare them deceased. I believe it's common sense but also requires some education to the public because a majority of people don't know what the coroner does therefore I'd like to inform our constituents.

On scene the job of the coroner and/or deputy coroner is to conduct a full investigation of the scene and circumstances of the death to determine cause and manor of death. Part of this investigation includes determining if toxicology and/or autopsy is necessary. If toxicology is required, it is our duty to obtain sample and send for testing. If an autopsy is required, it is our duty to schedule an autopsy and provide transportation. We are also responsible for identification of decedent.

Cause and manner of death are very important part of determining statistics on deaths to narrow down demographics and causes not just in Missouri but nationally. All deaths are required to be reported to state and should be completed appropriately as mentioned above. Failure to complete processes as recommended in standards and statues could be considered falsifying records therefore our office is dedicated to following all standards and statues.

We have begun the process of implementing things to benefit our county in years to come. We actually have the equipment to begin doing DNA on every person that dies in the county but at this time we don't have a sterile environment to implement this process. Once we are able to obtain that we will implement this into our role to better serve the citizens of Phelps County. This implementation will allow for DNA comparison and could help with identification if needed.

The coroner and/or deputy coroner is responsible for providing emotional support to family as well as providing resources and options available. We coordinate with the funeral home to provide a positive outcome in a negative situation. Our professional duty is to be compassionate and advocate for the decedent and the family.

If there is no next of kin identified at time of investigation all personal property which include money, guns/weapons, jewelry, and anything determined to be of significant value are to be seized by the coroner and/or deputy coroner and taken into their custody.

At this time, we do not have a secure storage area to store any property. This is to ensure that persons not appropriate for those possessions are not provided the opportunity to retrieve from decedents home. In addition, if no next of kin is identified, it is the duty of the coroner and/or deputy coroner to exhaust all means necessary to locate said individual(s). If no individuals are found it is our duty to provide storage for unclaimed decedents and make arrangements after a certain period of time.

We partner with law enforcement on cases of unusual and/or suspicious deaths which includes but not limited to investigating the scene and collecting evidence. We coordinate with law enforcement and state social services for Infant Fatality Review boards.

We are responsible for completing death certificates and filing them electronically with the state. We are also required to respond to public inquires and requests.

In accordance with the Sunshine law, we are required to assist persons such as attorneys or insurance companies with our findings.

Statue requires us to work with procurement services for body donation for transplant or research.

For further clarification of our duties, I would like to mention that it takes on average for a normal death taking care of the deceased and family as well as all necessary paperwork including a report of investigation seven hours to complete. Last year the office had 397 deaths X 7 hours is approximately 2800 hours although not all deaths are normal so many cases take an extended period of time anywhere from 8-24 hours.

Our goals for this office:

It's vitally important that we have a secure and sterile facility to hold further investigation beyond the scene including obtaining toxicology and further external autopsy. This sterile environment would decrease chances of cross contamination and ensure accurate testing is completed. A secure location will ensure that chain of custody of evidence is maintained appropriately which is vital to the integrity of the case. In addition, it is very important that we have a facility that we can keep decedents belongings, medications including prescription and illicit, medical records which by HIPPA laws require them to be secure and available for access only by individuals that are identified as involved in the case and records of death secure.

Currently we are working out of a 10' x 10' office. I am very appreciative that the commission saw fit to provide the coroner after three years without an office. This office space is barely large enough to keep decedent records, investigative equipment and basic office equipment/supplies. We lack the space for secure storage and providing further examinations as mentioned above therefore part of goal is obtaining an appropriate facility to meet our needs.

Another goal is to become accredited through IACME and ABMDI. That in itself will open a lot of doors for federal and state grants but we cannot even open an application without proper storage and an investigative area or a policy and procedures manual which we are putting together at this time along with a mass casualty plan.

The more we learn about medical death investigation, we realize even more the preservation of evidence is very important for the citizens of the county and we have a duty to fulfill that for our constituents. The body is the most important piece of evidence in any case medical/natural, drug related, homicide, accidental, or suicide.

For too many years the laws and standards for death investigation have been ignored. Our state has adopted the ICAME and National Institute of Justice (NIJ) standards for Coroners and medical examiners. Now we are required to take certain training and Continuing Education Units (CEU) to be able to work as a coroner or deputy coroner and complete death certificates. New standards are being required to run for office since the state appointed a new commission. The new standards set up the coroners to roll back to the original duties as defined by statute. Our office's goal is to complete required training and follow statute.

We would like to start education and prevention programs for citizens of our county to address things such as drug abuse, suicide prevention, and healthy life choices. Our goal is education and awareness which is not possible due to the restraints our office is held to.

The reason for this letter is to protect the coroner and deputy coroner, our office and our constituents. There are things that I should be doing that I can't do because of the restrictions placed on our office despite asking and explaining need. The need for this has been explained above. We spent 8300\$ for a partial year of storage cost of remains. I am not asking for a million dollar facility. I am asking for a small facility with morgue, exam room, storage, and office space including facilities such as water.

Our allegiance is to the people of Phelps county and what is best for them and their families.