The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Executive Office of Health and Human Services

Department of Public Health

Registry of Vital Records and Statistics

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Dorchester, MA 02125

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April 24, 2020

TO: Massachusetts Medical Provider Community

FROM: Karin Barrett, Registrar of Vital Records and Statistics

SUBJECT: Department of Public Health Guidelines for Completion of a Death Certificate

While always essential, in these days of heightened demand for medical treatment, it is important to remember that the process of completing a death certificate accurately and timely is critical to families, public health response and disease surveillance as well as a statutory requirement.

The death certificate must be completed immediately upon death as it is required for transport out of beds and out of morgues to avoid overflow. Families also need the death certificate to proceed with funeral arrangements and obtain death benefits and epidemiologists to track mortality incidence, provide data for medical research, and inform public health programs. For hospitals and other facilities, rapid completion of the death certificate is required for transport out of beds and out of morgues to avoid overflow.

## Who Must Complete a Death Certificate?

The medical information required for a death certificate is required to be completed immediately. By law, the following medical professionals are authorized to complete the medical certification of a death certificate:

* The physician, nurse practitioner or physician assistant that pronounced death;
* The attending or covering physician, nurse practitioner or physician assistant, which may be the provider who last provided treatment or the decedent’s personal provider, as appropriate;
* A hospital medical officer; and
* A Massachusetts medical examiner when the case is under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Please note that, in most cases, a natural death does not meet the criteria for medical examiner referral.

Refusal or failure to complete the death certificate is punishable by law.

## What is the Process for Completing a Medical Certification of Death?

The death certificate may be completed by any of the methods described below. For deaths occurring in a hospital or other medical facility, internal procedures may vary. Some facilities may choose to enroll medical staff members or medical officers with a Vitals Information Partnership (VIP) account to facilitate either the electronic or fax attestation method. Please familiarize yourself with this process in advance by seeking assistance from your decedent affairs or other administrative office.

1. Electronic Certification
	* To certify electronically, medical certifiers must have an account to access the VIP electronic death registration system (EDRS). Information about obtaining an account is available online at <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/enroll-in-vip-as-a-medical-certifier> or you may request more information by emailing vip-accounts@state.ma.us. It is advisable to begin this process before you need it.
	* Quick start guides and other informational material about using the VIP EDRS system is available online at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/vip-electronic-death-registration-system-edrs>.
2. Fax Attestation
	* To certify death via fax attestation, medical providers most often provide medical information for a death certificate to a funeral home or medical staff persons on a death certificate worksheet (available online at <https://www.mass.gov/doc/medical-certifier-worksheet-0/download>) for data entry into the VIP system.
	* Once entered, the medical provider will receive a fax attestation form to verify that the information was entered correctly and either fax the attestation form (which will attach automatically to the electronic record) or otherwise deliver the form to the funeral home or medical staff person.
	* The process is described in more detail in the Quick Guide to Fax Attestation available online at <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/vip-edrs-for-medical-certifiers>

For deaths that do not occur in a hospital, such as at home or in a long-term-care facility, in most cases an RN/NP/PA Pronouncement of Death form is provided to the funeral home for removal of the decedent and to begin the death certificate process. The funeral home will begin the process for medical certification using the appropriate method for each case as above.

There is information available online to guide you in completing a cause-of-death. For COVID-19 deaths, please specify the strain of virus, using terms such as COVID-19, not just COVID or coronavirus.

* For deaths due to or complicated by COVID-19, please find CDC guidance here:
	+ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/covid-19.htm>
	+ Information about upcoming webinars and slide sets from past webinars are available here: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coca/calls/2020/index.asp>
* A general quick “cheat sheet” for cause-of-death is available here:
	+ <https://www.mass.gov/doc/reporting-cause-of-death-quick-reference/download>
* A comprehensive handbook for medical certifiers is available from the CDC:
	+ <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/hb_cod.pdf>

## For More Information

Many general questions about completing a death certificate can be answered by visiting the Registry of Vital Records and Statistics webpage <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/vip-electronic-death-registration-system-edrs>. If you need more information:

* For information related to obtaining a VIP account, please email vip-accounts@state.ma.us
* For general information related to completing a death certificate, please email vip@state.ma.us.
* For information about referrals to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, please call (617) 266-6767.