

*The Office of Chief Medical Examiner has accepted jurisdiction over the case involving the death of your family member or friend. Please accept our sincere condolences on the loss of your loved one. We recognize that the loss brings deep sorrow and presents one of the most stressful times in life. This brochure was developed to answer commonly asked questions and to provide some resources and information on what to expect in the coming days.*

### **What does it mean when the Office of Chief Medical Examiner accepts jurisdiction?**

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) determines the cause and manner of death for decedents that die from suspicious, unexplained, or other unnatural circumstances. A specially trained physician, known as a medical examiner, has been assigned to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death. In most circumstances, the decedent will be transported to the OCME by trained personnel or, in some cases, an appointed designee, for examination. In some instances, it may be possible to do an examination at a hospital or funeral home.

### **What should I do first?**

Once the OCME has accepted jurisdiction a Medicolegal Investigator will contact the next of kin on record. There is no need to come to OCME in person unless an investigator contacts you to schedule an appointment. The family should also contact a funeral director of their choice to handle the arrangements for their loved one. The funeral

home will contact the OCME to coordinate the release of your loved one. In some instances, the decedent may have to be identified. Under these circumstances, an investigator will contact you for further information.

### **How is the cause and manner of death determined?**

If the decedent has been brought to the OCME, the medical examiner will need to complete his/her examination to determine the cause and manner of death. A full external and internal examination (autopsy) may be required to determine the cause and manner of death. In other cases, an external examination may be all that is necessary. By law, the decision to perform an autopsy is determined at the discretion of the medical examiner or the district attorney. However, the legal next of kin may request that an autopsy not be performed. Such requests may be made by calling the OCME Intake Department at 857-377-2200 and completing an "Statement of Opposition to Autopsy" form. Medical examiners may take biological samples such as blood, tissue, organs, and/or other materials to study further in an effort to determine the cause and manner of death. Toxicology testing may be performed if the medical examiner believes that the results may directly assist in the determination of cause or manner of death. These tests will not delay the release of the body to the next of kin. However, the results of such testing may take several weeks to finalize. All biological samples that are retained will be disposed of after a matter of time, sometimes weeks, sometimes up to 5 years depending on the specimen. Biological material cannot be released while an investigation is pending. You may contact the OCME to request that such materials be released to you for final disposition through your funeral home once a determination of cause and manner has been finalized. The medical examiner will also conduct a

review of all available and pertinent records and investigative materials as part of the death investigation. Final death certificates and autopsy reports can take up to ninety (90) days to complete depending on the circumstances and testing required for the cases. If you do not receive a notification from the OCME after 90 days that the cause and manner of death have been finalized, you may contact the OCME Administrative Support Staff at 617-267-6767.

### **What if I do not have the resources to make burial arrangements for my loved one or friend?**

In these instances, the following resources are available:

1. You may contact a funeral home to request a funeral or burial application through the Department of Transitional Assistance. A funeral director should be able to assist you with this process.
2. If you do not have the resources to arrange for final disposition, or do not wish to claim your loved one, the assigned Medicolegal Investigator will forward a certified letter to the legal next of kin, which will include a "Not Claiming Form" and will state that the OCME will work with the Department of Transitional Assistance to arrange for burial.

### **How do I obtain reports generated by the OCME?**

In all instances, a death certificate is generated. In some cases, the cause and manner of death may be listed as pending until the medical examiner completes his/her studies. For insurance claims relating to pending death certificates, please have your insurance company contact the OCME directly.

Death certificates completed by the OCME must be filed with the city or town clerk where the death occurred. The OCME does not issue death certificates. The funeral director can assist you in obtaining copies of the death certificate. Depending upon the circumstances of the case, an autopsy and/or toxicology report may be available. To request autopsy and/or toxicology reports, the legal next of kin should submit a "Request for Report" form located at [www.mass.gov/ocme](http://www.mass.gov/ocme) and return to our office via email at [CMEAdmins1@mass.gov](mailto:CMEAdmins1@mass.gov) or by standard US postal service to the Office of Chief Medical Examiner, 720 Albany Street, Boston, MA 02118.

### **Is anyone else entitled to the reports generated by the OCME?**

A death certificate is a public record. Anyone may request a copy of the death certificate from the clerk's office in the city or town the death occurred. By law, autopsy reports are not public records. Autopsy reports can be requested by the legal next of kin or those with written permission from the next of kin. Additionally, autopsy reports may be issued pursuant to 505 CMR 1, including but not limited to healthcare providers, investigatory bodies, authorities compiling statistical data and attorneys involved in civil litigation. Insurance companies may also receive autopsy reports with consent from the legal next of kin. Reports may not be disseminated in cases where there is an open and ongoing investigation with the district attorney's office.

### **Will the next of kin be charged for any services provided by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner?**

If the family chooses cremation or burial at sea, there is an authorization fee which is mandated by G.L. c. 38, §14 and is handled through the Funeral Director. There are no other charges to the family for the services of the Medical Examiner.

### **What happens to the personal property or medication that is brought with the decedent to the Office of Chief Medical Examiner?**

The personal property of the deceased that accompanies the body is inventoried by the OCME and released to the Funeral Director when the decedent is removed from the OCME. All medications are documented, inventoried, and disposed of by the OCME. In some cases, the hospital or police will secure personal property. If a crime is involved with the individual's death, it may be necessary for the police to take possession of some or all personal items. You may contact the appropriate law enforcement agency to request the return of property.

### **Where Can I Find Help?**

For additional questions or further assistance, you may contact the OCME at 617-267-6767.

The following is a partial list of some of the many resources which you may find helpful during this difficult time.<sup>1</sup> Each office can direct you to services in your area.

#### ***Grief Services:***

The Compassionate Friends (Supporting family after a child dies)  
877-969-0010

The Massachusetts Center for Unexpected Infant & Child Death  
617-414-7437  
[www.magriefcenter.org](http://www.magriefcenter.org)

#### ***Suicide Survivors:***

Samaritans, Inc  
877-870-HOPE (4673)

#### ***Homicide Survivors:***

Center for Homicide Bereavement  
617-591-6123  
Cambridge Health Alliance

#### ***Massachusetts Funeral Directors Association***

781-335-2031  
[www.massfda.org](http://www.massfda.org)

#### ***Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance (MOVA)***

617-587-1340

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<sup>1</sup> The OCME is not affiliated with the programs listed in this brochure

**The Commonwealth of  
Massachusetts**



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