

ROLE OF THE MEDICAL EXAMINER

To investigate sudden unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural deaths in Whatcom County.

BASIC DUTIES

- IDENTIFICATION
- NOTIFICATION
- DETERMINE COD/MOD (Cause and Manner of Death)
- PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

MISSION STATEMENT

- The Medical Examiner's Office is an independent agency which serves the citizens of Whatcom County by investigating deaths and gathering facts concerning circumstances surrounding the deaths of those who have died unexpectedly and suddenly while in apparent good health. Our geographic boundaries are all of Whatcom County.
- Our mission is to serve the citizens and community of Whatcom County with the highest level of compassion, professionalism, and care to those who died in Whatcom County.

HOW TO CARRY OUT MISSION

- Interact with ***integrity, dignity, compassion*** and ***respect***
- Develop and nurture relationship(s) of Trust with community and stakeholders
- Determine cause and manner of death (COD/MOD) while protecting the integrity of the decedent and the case (often cases can become criminal)
- All information is considered sensitive and protected
- Hire, train, and certify professionals to work under the authority of the Medical Examiner

AUTHORITY AND HIPAA

- Ratified Code of Washington (RCW)
 - RCW 68.50.010 (Jurisdiction)
 - Reports and Records are Confidential (RCW 68.50.105)
- The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)
 - Three rules: The Privacy Rule, The Security Rule and the Breach Notification Rule
 - Extends 50 years after death
 - Medical Examiner must comply with HIPAA law to protect the integrity of both the decedent and the death scene investigation

ROLE AND COLLABORATIONS

- Partnering with Public Health in Real Time (As close as possible) i.e. FENTANYL Reporting
- Lummi Nation
- EMS AND PeaceHealth (“Catching” Deaths)
- Proper review and certification of death certificates (I.E., falls, fractures)
- Ferndale, Lynden, Blaine Police Departments
- Bellingham Police Department
- Sheriff’s Office
- Host Annual Training for Law Enforcement and other Stakeholders
- Bringing Morgue facility up to standards required for Accreditation
- Scene investigations (every scene – every time) – Adhere to guidelines instituted by the Department of Justice in 2011

ROLE AND COLLABORATIONS, CONT.

- Organ and tissue procurement agencies
- Electronic Record Keeping
- Readily available for both Prosecuting and Defense Attorneys, County Executive and other Stakeholders
- Complete and transparent reporting which includes cases investigated and financial reporting.
- Fire Departments and Districts (Lynden Fire Dept. provided much needed gurneys.)
- Funeral Homes (notification and release of decedents, integrity of decedent ensuring properly sewed and bagged and cleaned)
- Proper and respectful transportation of decedents
- Release reports to families

ROLE OF INVESTIGATORS

- ABMDI CERTIFICATION
 - The American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) is a voluntary national, not-for-profit, independent professional certification board that has been established to promote the highest standards of practice for medicolegal death investigators.
- ALL COMMUNICATION IS WITH THE NEXT-OF-KIN AND VERBAL IS PREFERRED
- FOLLOWING RCW [68.50.105](#), ME COMMUNICATION IS DIRECTLY BETWEEN:
 - Next of Kin (NOK)
 - Law Enforcement
 - Treating Physician
 - Prosecuting Attorney
- EXCEPTIONS EXTEND TO PUBLIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC SAFETY REVIEW BOARDS

ROLE OF FAMILY LIASON

The Family Liaison works under the authority and on behalf of the Medical Examiner and is licensed through ABMDI. The Family Liaison serves the Medical Examiner and assists death scene investigations under ME jurisdiction through:

- Responding to every Medical Examiner investigation
- Ensuring lawful obligation to protect the integrity of the decedent, investigation, scene and information obtained is upheld.
- Meeting with family, friends, bystanders and witnesses
- If Next of Kin (NOK) are not at the scene; identifying, locating and notifying the next of kin
- If NOK is on scene, meeting in private setting to gather confidential (protected) information regarding the circumstances surround the discovery/death, medical and social history.
- Providing information to NOK re: investigation, examination, release to funeral home, death certificate process, and provide complete list of funeral home options.
- **Assisting with transition of NOK and vulnerable friends and family to on scene Support Officer**
- **Keeping in constant contact with NOK/family to provide them with updates regarding the case.**
- Documenting information and providing report to the Medical Examiner

ROLE OF SUPPORT OFFICER(S)

- Support Officers Ministries (SOM) is a volunteer, non-profit organization that has contracted with local law enforcement agencies (Sheriff and BPD) for decades to provide critical and valuable grief support services to law enforcement officers, first responders and persons experiencing tragedy or trauma related to a death.
- Recently, the ME and Administration met with the Support Officer Ministries' (SOM) contract administrators (Sheriff and BFD) to better understand their expectations of the Support Officer's role at death scenes. With the recent submission of a "Scope of Work" from SOM we are looking forward to meeting with **all** parties to further clarify roles and responsibilities. This evolution continues to improve as distinct roles are clarified.



Medical Examiner

Takes jurisdiction over death scene if sudden unexpected, violent, suspicious, or unnatural

Protects the Integrity of the decedent and death scene.

Works with LE, investigators and families. Provides cause and manner of death.

Family Liaison

Works under authority of ME

Supports Investigators, families, and preserves confidentiality

Works to transition family/NOK to SOM for grief support and non-protected interaction

Support Officer

Works under agreements with LE agencies

Provides essential grief support to and for families and LE

IN CLOSING

The new Medical Examiner has been working as the Whatcom County Medical Examiner for 28 months. Although much has been achieved in that short time span, there is more to be done to ensure efficient and timely performance of this specialized service to the community.

The Medical Examiner has worked hard to meet the needs of our community in a professional, skilled and trustworthy manner to ensure the integrity, dignity and confidentiality of the decedent and the death scene investigation.

She continues to build relationships with stakeholders and peer agencies as she expands the role of the Medical Examiner's Office to meet the needs of the community and fulfill the obligations of the Medical Examiner as per RCW.

We look forward to many more years of exemplary service to our community.