

Considerations for Law Enforcement Encountering COVID-19-Related Deaths

As concerns of COVID-19 continue to spread throughout local communities, law enforcement agencies should prepare officers for the unfortunate situation of encountering a COVID-19-related unattended death. Where feasible, officers should not be responsible for touching or removal of a dead body where COVID-19 is suspected. Rather, EMS personnel, funeral directors, and medical examiners should be involved. The following considerations are specific to COVID-19 deaths where law enforcement is responding without the assistance of a medical examiner.

COORDINATE

Law enforcement agencies should proactively:

- Communicate protocols about exposure risk to personnel.
- Implement screening questions for calls for service related to deaths for COVID-19 to determine risk for officers in advance.
- Ensure proper infectious disease reporting. Communicate the risk of exposure with public health departments, hospitals, coroners, medical examiners, funeral directors, and anyone else involved in transportation of a deceased infected individual to minimize risk of exposure.
- Communicate the circumstances of the death to those involved in transportation of a deceased infected individual to allow for appropriate allocation of resources (i.e. PPE, staff support, etc.).



PROTECT

Law enforcement agencies should be sure to provide training to all personnel on proper application and removal of PPE as well as proper hand-washing techniques. Follow your agency policy or [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) guidance](#). Officers who encounter or come into contact with a deceased individual suspected of having COVID-19 should:

- Avoid disturbing the body. Based on what is now believed, the virus is transmitted through the air or when touching contaminated surfaces. Because the body is not producing air exchange or actively coughing, the need to use some PPE items may be less urgent. However, risk remains until the last gust of air has been expelled from the body (which may be post-mortem).
- Officers should use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) if available, in accordance with agency policy. PPE might include:
 - Respirator (such as an N-95 or higher) or other appropriate mask
 - Non-latex gloves
 - Protective glasses or goggles
 - Impermeable suit or gown
 - Rubber boots
- Use caution when removing PPE and follow standard operating procedures for PPE disposal. See [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) guidance](#).
- Use extra precaution when entering homes or businesses.
- Follow guidance in document titled ***Law Enforcement Officer Exposure to COVID-19***.

Communicating with Families

Suspected COVID-19 deaths may result from symptoms of the virus or complications related to underlying health conditions. As such, the cause of death should be considered “suspected” until confirmed by a Medical Examiner, which may take some time. Family members at the scene of the death will likely have questions and experience a range of emotions. Officers should:

- Use calm, clear, and direct language when speaking with the deceased’s loved ones.
- Presume all inhabitants within living space to be carriers regardless of absent symptoms.
 - Maintain six feet of separation during interviews.
 - Consider conducting interviews of family or housemates outside with good air exchange.
 - Ask screening questions of anyone present in the living space to promote the safety of the officers.
- Encourage the family to safely de-contaminate the home and any surfaces that the deceased individual may have been in contact with.
 - Be sure to suggest using a cleaning agent listed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and/or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to destroy the virus.
 - Suggest the family consider wearing PPE during cleaning or contracting a professional cleaning company to reduce their own risk of exposure to the virus.
- Encourage the family to follow CDC guidelines for self-quarantine, if applicable.

Media Relations

If media representatives reach out to the police agency after learning of a possible COVID-19 related death, the policy agency should refer the media official to the appropriate public health department. If the appropriate public health department requests it, agencies may choose to hold a briefing or press conference in conjunction with medical officials and other public health officials to alert the community of a COVID-19-related death. In any instance, it is important to respect the deceased individual’s privacy and personal information, as well as any wishes for privacy by the family.

Resources Specific to COVID-19 Deaths

- [CDC Postmortem Guidance](#)
- [CDC Coronavirus Guidance for Funeral Directors](#)
- [OSHA Control and Prevention](#)

To access tools and resources to assist in informing your agency response to COVID-19, visit the [CRI-TAC COVID-19 Library of Resources](#), a compilation of resources by the field of law enforcement, for the field of law enforcement.