



Sheridan Police Department  
Policies and Procedures  
28.12  
Chapter 28 – Call Response  
Section 12 – Death Investigations

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Signature:

Death investigations by the Sheridan Police Department will be handled in a compassionate and respectful manner with the intent to determine if criminal activity was involved in the death.

**28.12.1 Authority**

- A. Wyoming Statute 7-4-201 requires any person discovering a death that appears to have occurred under circumstances indicating the death is a coroner's case, to immediately report it to law enforcement authorities who shall in turn notify the coroner.
- B. "Coroner's case" means a case involving a death which was not anticipated (under a doctor's or hospice care) and which may involve any of the following conditions:
  - 1. Violent or criminal action;
  - 2. Apparent suicide;
  - 3. Accident;
  - 4. Apparent drug or chemical overdose or toxicity;
  - 5. The deceased was unattended by a physician or other licensed health care provider;
  - 6. Apparent child abuse causes;
  - 7. The deceased was a prisoner, trustee, inmate or patient of any county or state corrections facility or state hospital, whether or not the death is unanticipated;
  - 8. If the cause is unknown or cannot be certified by a physician;
  - 9. A public health hazard is presented; or
  - 10. The identity of the victim is unknown or the body is unclaimed.

**28.12.2 General Response Procedures**

- A. All unattended deaths reported to the Sheridan Police Department shall receive preliminary investigation as a possible homicide.
- B. The shift supervisor shall respond to the scene of all unattended death calls.
- C. Upon the arrival of emergency medical personnel, the officer should inform them of the facts and circumstances known. It will be the responsibility of emergency medical services to determine the number of additional personnel needed to render effective aid to the injured, without unnecessarily compromising the crime scene. Emergency medical services personnel need not enter the crime scene when there are definitive signs of death such as:
  - a. Decapitation;
  - b. Severe bloating/decomposition;
  - c. Incineration; or
  - d. Massive dismemberment.

- D. These definitive signs will be clearly communicated by the officer to emergency medical services personnel on scene. If there is any debate over the observed signs, a single emergency services person shall be asked to check the victim.
- E. Once death has been established, officers should clear the area of unnecessary persons and protect the scene for further investigation, being careful not to alter the scene in any way. The coroner should be called to the scene.
- F. The coroner has responsibility for determining cause of death while law enforcement is responsible for determining if criminality was involved in the death. Officers will coordinate their efforts to process the scene and preserve the evidence with the coroner and ensure that the coroner is given all the information needed to complete his or her duties.
- G. Officers are cautioned that the requirements for a search warrant may apply. If so, officers may clear the area for suspects or persons that may pose a danger to them, but may not search for evidence until a warrant is obtained.
- H. Officers investigating a death will complete the following steps and include the information in an incident report:
  - a. Identify the victim;
  - b. Examine the decedent for signs of injury and/or trauma;
  - c. Photograph the decedent and the area near the decedent for signs of foul play (i.e. - signs of forced entry, missing property, etc.);
  - d. Locate, identify and record names and statements of any witnesses; and
  - e. Officers should avoid duplication of questioning witnesses or family member(s) on-scene.
- I. When investigating a death where circumstances indicate the probability that the death resulted from natural causes, the investigating officer shall make inquiry to the patient's medical history.
- J. After completion of the on-scene investigation, the body will be removed as determined by the coroner.
- K. Suicides
  - 1. In suspected suicide cases, officers shall be alert for a suicide note.
  - 2. If an overdose is suspected, any medications and/or pill containers should be preserved.
- L. Hospice Deaths
  - 1. Deaths that occur under hospice care are anticipated deaths so there is no requirement that law enforcement be notified and no authority for the coroner's office to investigate the death. The person discovering the death may arrange for a mortuary to pick up the body.
  - 2. In some cases, family members and/or friends may contact law enforcement instead of contacting the hospice caregiver or a mortuary. In these cases, law enforcement officers should be dispatched to the location where the person is deceased.
    - a. Officers, once at the scene, should check on the status of the patient.
    - b. If the officer determines that there is a do-not-resuscitate order in force, the officer should typically not attempt any lifesaving measures.
    - c. If officers are called to the scene of a hospice patient's death, they should, in a non-intrusive manner, check the area to determine if there appears to be any foul play. Officers responding to the scene of a hospice patient's death should try to do so with a minimal amount of intrusion and in a respectful fashion.

- d. If no suspicious circumstances are obvious, information should be provided to the caller on his or her options in contacting a mortuary service.

M. Medical Care Facilities

1. Under certain circumstances (i.e. - a suspicious death) medical care facilities or the coroner may notify the department upon the death of a person under medical care.
2. Under those circumstances the requirements of this policy apply and the death will be investigated.

### **28.12.3 Death Notifications**

- A. Death notifications shall generally be made by the coroner's office; however it may be necessary to make notification as part of the investigation or for other reasons.
- B. Death notifications to a member of the family or other responsible party should be made in person whenever possible.
  1. Whenever a decedent's next of kin lives in this municipality, and notification must be made by the department, a member of the department shall personally respond to make the notification of death.
  2. This notification could be for a death that occurred in another jurisdiction and a request has been made for this department to notify a resident within our jurisdiction.
  3. Where staffing levels permit, two (2) officers should make the notification, at least one (1) of whom should be in uniform.
  4. Before an officer responds to make a death notification, consideration should be given to involving known friends, clergy, emergency medical services or victim advocates in the notification.
  5. Upon arriving at the survivor's residence, the officers should introduce themselves, present their credentials and request admission.
  6. Survivors should be informed of the death, simply and directly.
  7. Upon the request of the survivors, the officer should provide as much information as possible regarding the circumstances of the death, without jeopardizing a criminal investigation.
- C. Information that shall be provided to the next of kin includes:
  1. Place of death;
  2. Circumstances of death;
  3. Who they can contact for further information; and
  4. The location of the decedent.
- D. It is important that an officer attempt to have someone present at the residence before he or she leaves. Officers should avoid leaving the decedent's relatives alone. The officers should ask the survivors if there is anyone they would like to have called to provide assistance or comfort.

### **28.12.4 Dying Declarations**

- A. Officers investigating a criminal incident when the victim is dying as a result of the crime should make every effort to obtain a statement from the victim.
- B. Before a court will admit a dying declaration into evidence, it must appear at the point of death, that the person dying was under a sense of impending death with no hope of recovery and that the declaration related to the cause of his or her death. The admission of a dying declaration as evidence in court is based upon the premise that a person who is at the point of death, and is aware of his or her physical condition, is not likely to make a false accusation.

- C. The officer should ascertain the following information. It should be recorded and be in the presence of witnesses if possible:
  - 1. Name and address of victim;
  - 2. The victim believes that he or she is about to die;
  - 3. The victim has no hope of recovery; and
  - 4. The victim is willing to make a true statement of how he or she was injured.

#### **28.12.5 Assistance to Survivors**

- A. Law enforcement should attempt to meet the immediate well-being, and needs of families and friends who have lost a loved one to sudden and unexpected death.
- B. Families and friends who have lost a loved one to sudden and unexpected death should be provided access to victim services.
- C. Family members who have lost a loved one to homicide, which includes manslaughter and death by auto, should be notified by the investigative division of the status and outcome of the criminal case.