

Commonly Asked Questions When Death Occurs



Darren Dake
Crawford County Coroner

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Office of Coroner

Crawford County, Missouri

PO Box U

Cuba, Missouri 65453

Office: (573) 775-4250

Dispatch: (573) 775-4912

Fax: (573) 775-2919

Email: crawfordmo.coroner@gmail.com



A message from Crawford County Coroner

Darren Dake, D-ABMDI



Truly, the only universal experiences we share are birth and death. With birth, there is joy and elation. In death, there is sorrow and grief.

It is my hope that the Crawford County Coroner's Office can help you through this trying time and resolve the questions you may have regarding the death of your loved one. This brochure was designed to provide you with a "first step" in managing this difficult period.

On behalf of my entire staff, I wish to express our sympathies at your time of loss and encourage you to call upon us if we may help in any way.

Mission Statement

The Crawford County Coroner's Office serves as a bridge between the living and the dead. We give voice to the departed and, with all due diligence, endeavor to provide answers to the survivors.

Utilizing the resources available by the application of science and under the principles of law, we strive to assure that justice prevails for those deprived of our most precious possession ---- Life

Why is the Coroner involved and what does the Coroner's Office do?

Missouri law requires that the Coroner's Office investigate any death of a sudden, violent, or suspicious nature. Generally speaking, any death that occurs outside of a hospital setting, or within 24 hours of admission to the hospital, requires notification of the Coroner's Office.

The principal responsibility of the Coroner is to assure that a death did not occur as the result of foul play. To help determine the manner and cause of death, the investigator may employ a variety of investigative techniques including interviews with family members and physicians, scene analysis and photography, and physical examination of the decedent. Oftentimes, these aspects of the investigation will provide the information needed to close the death investigation. It is possible that the family physician will be allowed to certify the death certificate.

Sometimes, family members feel as if they are under suspicion or are being asked overly personal questions. The investigation is meant to bring forth enough information to explain why your loved one died. What may seem like very personal or trivial information to you may be a wealth of knowledge for us. Please remember that it is our job to speak for the dead and assure that justice prevails among men and society.

Why is the Coroner involved in a Hospice death?

In most cases the hospice nurse attending to your loved one will be the liaison between you and the Coroner's office. In a large percentage of deaths, they are reported to our office and we release jurisdiction because your loved one is under a doctor's care for a known illness. However, in a few cases our office might be involved if there are questions about the timing of the death, if medication is missing or unaccounted for, or if the death occurred for reasons other than the underlying illness your loved one had. There are also times that an investigator may arrive at your home to speak to the hospice nurse directly while your loved one is still in the home. These are times that our office is strengthening the cooperation between the hospice agency and our office. This in no way implies any problems and the coroner investigator will communicate with you the reason they are at your home.

Will there be an autopsy?

That depends on a number of factors. Age, medical history, and the circumstances surrounding the death are the major considerations. The Coroner's Office may defer an autopsy if enough facts concerning the events leading up to the death are known, verified, and supported by pre-existing medical conditions. Deaths involving the possibility of criminal activity, children, and those in good health prior to death will most likely be autopsied. Likewise, deaths in which the scene investigation suggests an external event (electrocution, drowning, overdose, etc.) will probably undergo autopsy.

Can I refuse to allow an autopsy?

We realize that this is a very personal and sensitive matter and some people object to an autopsy. Missouri law **REQUIRES** the Coroner to perform autopsy examination in certain cases such as child deaths. In other cases, autopsies are necessary for us to perform a competent investigation and Missouri law recognizes that the Coroner must have the authority to order an autopsy despite family objections. If you object to an autopsy for personal or religious reasons, we will discuss the issue and attempt to resolve the matter in a way that will provide you with peace of mind but still allow a thorough inquiry. Regrettably though, there are cases that we feel mandate an autopsy regardless of your wishes.

How long will it take to get the results of the autopsy examination?

In most instances a preliminary finding will be known within a few days after death. The final determination may have to wait until all toxicology testing is completed which could be several weeks depending on the back-log of laboratories.

May I request an autopsy?

If you have concerns that you feel can only be addressed by autopsy, please tell us as soon as possible. The information may cause us to authorize the procedure. Sometimes, family members desire an autopsy to reveal the presence of any hereditary related diseases or for their own personal knowledge. If this is the case, but the death falls outside our criteria for autopsy examination, we will assist you in securing the services of a pathologist for a private autopsy. In this case, you would be responsible for the costs of the procedure.

What other tests might the Coroner's Office perform?

We have other scientific tests that we utilize alone or in conjunction with autopsy examination to aid our investigation. It is fairly routine for blood and other body fluids, to be collected and sent for alcohol and drug screening. In fact, State law requires such tests in motor vehicle deaths. Other tests may include blood cultures to determine infections or x-rays to detect the presence of fractures.

Why is establishing positive identification so important?

In addition to being a tragic and emotional personal event, death is also a profound legal event bringing about the possibilities of court action, the processing of insurance claims, and the settlement of estates. Positive identification of the decedent, accomplished by the examination of circumstantial and scientific evidence, is a necessary prerequisite for the fulfillment of this legal event. In cases where the remains are disfigured, decomposed, or burned, advanced identification processes involving fingerprint recovery, DNA analysis, or dental comparison may be necessary to identify the deceased with scientific certainty. These tests may require days or weeks to process and delay final disposition of the decedent. Undoubtedly, this delay is emotionally troubling and difficult to bear, but is absolutely essential to the investigation and subsequent certification of death.

Why was the deceased's medication collected by the investigator?

This is a routine and standard practice. The medication provides a “quick reference” to the types of diseases the deceased suffered. Additionally, if further blood tests are performed, the laboratory may need the actual medications to help interpret the results. As federal law prohibits possession of medications by anyone other than the person to whom it was prescribed, the medications will not be returned. They will be destroyed at the conclusion of the investigation.

When will personal effects be returned?

Most often they will be transferred to the authorized next-of-kin immediately. Otherwise, you should receive them after the body is released from the Coroner's Office to the funeral home or after the Coroner's Inquest. If the items become evidence in a criminal case, the State's Attorney's Office will decide when the items may be released to the next-of-kin.

What is a Coroner's Inquest and when is it required?

A Coroner's Inquest is neither a civil nor a criminal trial proceeding. It is simply an inquiry into the manner and cause of an individual's death and may be convened when the death occurs under violent, traumatic, suspicious or criminal circumstances and in cases of profound public interest. The Coroner also has discretion to administratively review and close death investigations where the investigation has produced sufficient information and evidence to conclude the matter and issue a death certificate with reasonable certainty and without conflict or question.

The purpose of the inquest is to present pertinent information concerning the victim's death in order for a jury to arrive at a cause and manner of death. The cause of death is often readily apparent and obvious, based on the facts, circumstances, medical evidence and in some cases toxicology and autopsy results. The jury's responsibility is to establish the manner of death – being suicide, homicide, accident, natural, or undetermined.

How long will it be before a death certificate is available?

A death certificate may be available within 48 hours if the deceased has been under a doctor's care. In the event of a complex death investigation requiring a Coroner's Inquest, the process may be delayed several weeks, but a temporary certificate may be issued to allow the funeral to be carried out. We strive to process cases as expeditiously as possible, but a competent death investigation requires time with attention to detail.

Where do I obtain certified copies of the death certificate and other coroner's reports?

The Coroner's Office DOES NOT maintain the death certificates. The funeral home you have chosen to handle the final arrangements can assist in getting you copies of the death certificate. The Crawford County Health Department is ultimately responsible for maintaining death certificates for anyone who dies in Crawford County.

Coroner's records and reports will be available after the death certificate is issued unless the case is an ongoing investigation or has been ordered sealed by the court.

What else do I need to think about?

If you have not already done so, you will need to select a funeral home for arrangements after the preliminary investigation and/or autopsy are completed. Also, locating important documents such as insurance policies and veteran's papers may be useful. You will undoubtedly have more questions than this brochure will answer. It's very important to write your questions down for later reference. Coroner's staff will try to answer those questions or refer you to the person or agency that can.

Funeral Homes in our area

Cuba:

- Hutson Funeral Home 573-885-4747
- Mizell Funeral Home 573-885-3355

Steeltville:

- Britton-Bennett Funeral Home 573-775-2123
- Hutson Funeral Home 573-775-2911

Sullivan:

- Eaton Funeral Home 573-468-4147

St. James:

- James and Gahr Mortuary 573-265-3232
- Jones Funeral Home 573-265-3278

Other Important Phone Numbers

- Crawford County Prosecuting Attorney 573-775-5010
- Crawford County Sheriff 573-775-2125
- Crawford County Juvenile Office 573-775-2787
- Health Department 573-775-2555
- Family Services 573-775-2186

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