

THERE IS NO GREATER LOSS THAN THE DEATH OF YOUR CHILD.

When an infant or child dies suddenly, a team of professionals investigate their death. There may be many different professionals involved on this first day. It can be confusing to understand what is happening during this very overwhelming tragedy.

This brochure will provide you with a framework of what to expect in the days, weeks and months ahead, as well as provide you with resources on where you can go for help.

Medicolegal death investigation authorities involved may be:

- **Medicolegal death investigator**

On the day of your child's death, you may have met a medicolegal death investigator. This individual collects information to assist the medical examiner. They investigate the scene where your child lived and died and interview the parents and caregivers to gain a better understanding of the child's life and the events leading up to the time of their death. The medicolegal death investigator is generally not a police officer, but usually works in the medical examiner office.

- **Medical examiner**

The role of the medical examiner is to determine the exact cause of your child's death and why it occurred. To do this, they evaluate the information gathered by the medicolegal death investigator and perform an autopsy and additional testing. The medical examiner is a medical doctor, often with a specialty in forensic pathology. They are especially trained to evaluate the cause of death and if a crime has been committed. A pathologist is a doctor specially trained to study the cause and effects of diseases.

Additional agencies involved:

Members of law enforcement are often some of the first responders in the instance of a sudden death. Family services or another child protective service agency may evaluate the safety of other children in the environment as governed by local policy. All agencies will perform their own independent investigation in parallel with the medical examiner.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW

Your child will be cared for respectfully and transported to the hospital morgue for an autopsy. The autopsy is an external and internal examination of a body. Licensed physicians, specifically forensic pathologists, will perform a forensic autopsy to help determine their cause of death. After examination, the body is closed. Specimens of body fluids and tissues are retained for diagnostic testing. When necessary, an organ, such as the brain and/or heart, may also be retained for further testing. None of these tests will prevent the body from being released to the family for funeral arrangements.

Once the pathologist completes the autopsy, your funeral home of choice can coordinate your child's release and the process of a funeral can begin.

The medical examiner's office may contact you soon after the autopsy is performed to share information with you or request additional information. The medical examiner may also explain that more tests need to be performed to understand why your child died. Under this circumstance, the initial cause of death on your child's death certificate may read "pending further investigation." This will be amended when further testing and the investigation are complete. Further tests will include examining small tissue samples collected during the autopsy under a microscope. The health or disease of an organ can be evaluated in this way. The pathologist may pursue other testing as needed to assist in determining your child's cause and manner of death.

It is important that the medical examiner perform a thorough evaluation of your child to understand their death. The full investigation will take several weeks, and often a few months, before the final assessment is complete. At that time, the final autopsy report is available.

Autopsy Report Conclusions

The report will list a "cause of death" and a "manner of death". The "cause of death" is found by autopsy; an infection, cancer or injury that is responsible for the death. To describe the "manner of death", or how the death occurred, the medical examiner has five coding options: natural, homicide, suicide, accidental, and undetermined.

"Undetermined" manner may be used when environmental and autopsy findings cannot clearly distinguish the manner of death.

IMPORTANT CONTACT INFORMATION

Your medical examiner's name:

John Smith

Your medical examiner's phone number:

(555) 555-5555

Your child's medical examiner case number:

Your medicolegal investigator's name:

Contact for Office Updates if Different:

Your point of contact at the medical examiner's office will be able to tell you how and when to anticipate case updates and the final cause of death opinion.

To obtain a copy of the final autopsy report:

- Call your point of contact at the medical examiner's office at the phone number listed above.
- When you call, provide your child's name and medical examiner case number (listed above), and confirm that you are his/her legal next of kin.
- Specific instructions will be provided to you including how to receive a copy of the autopsy report when it is ready. You may need to submit this request in writing.

Note: *There may be costs associated.*

Reading the autopsy report can be an overwhelming experience. Before doing so, discuss the report findings with your medical examiner. When you receive the report, it may be most helpful for you to read it with your child's pediatrician or family doctor, who can assist you with medical terminology you may not be familiar with, explain the significance of the findings and discuss any potential medical screening recommended for your family as a result of your child's death. If you still have questions, contact your medical examiner for further clarification.