



# Procedure 704 - Apparent Sudden Deaths

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#### .01 INTRODUCTION

- A. This procedure establishes processes for officers to report apparent sudden deaths to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office and for notifying a victim's legal next of kin of the apparent sudden death.
- B. Procedures for the investigation of homicides are covered in GM Procedure 701, Crime Scene Duties.

### .02 CLASSIFICATIONS OF APPARENT SUDDEN DEATHS

- A. Deaths Due to Natural Causes (i.e., long term illness, heart attack, stroke, etc.); or
- B. Violent Deaths deaths caused by intentional acts (i.e., homicide and suicide) or deaths caused by unintentional acts (i.e., traffic fatality, drowning, electrocution, falling, etc.).

#### .03 PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITIES

- A. The San Antonio Police Department has three (3) primary responsibilities involving the handling of apparent sudden deaths:
  - 1. Reporting all apparent sudden deaths to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office;
  - 2. Notification of the legal next of kin of the victim; and
  - 3. Safeguarding the victim's personal property.
- B. Officers must realize the sensitivity of the situation and express sympathy and compassion when delivering the notification to the victim's family.

### .04 PROCEDURE - DEATHS DUE TO NATURAL CAUSES

- A. Officers dispatched to a location other than a hospital for an apparent sudden death, determine if first aid is needed and provide assistance, if necessary, until emergency medical personnel arrive.
- B. An EMS unit is dispatched to assist the officer in determining the condition of the complainant. If it is apparent, after viewing the body, the complainant has expired due to natural causes, the investigating officer follows these guidelines:
  - 1. Contact Homicide Unit investigators and provides pertinent information.
  - 2. Contact the Medical Examiner's Office and provides the following information on the deceased (if known):
    - a. Full legal name;
    - b. Home address;
    - c. Location where deceased was found;





### Procedure 704 – Apparent Sudden Deaths

- d. Deceased's date of birth;
- e. Apparent cause of death;
- f. Time the deceased was discovered;
- g. Position in which the body was found;
- h. Deceased's social security number;
- i. Name of the deceased's physician;
- j. Medication taken;
- k. Known illnesses;
- 1. Name of physician who has agreed to sign the death certificate;
- m. Hospital or funeral home where the deceased is to be taken; and
- Legal next of kin notified.
- 3. The deceased may be transported to a hospital or funeral home by a private ambulance if a doctor agrees to sign the death certificate. The deceased must be pronounced dead by a physician either at a hospital or at the scene before removal to a funeral home.
- 4. The deceased body is transported to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office by contract ambulance when the physician for the deceased cannot be contacted.
- C. Officers dispatched to a hospital to take a report of an apparent sudden death by natural causes utilize the steps as outlined in .04B1-3 of this procedure.

#### .05 PROCEDURE - VIOLENT DEATHS

- A. Officers dispatched to a location other than a hospital for an apparent sudden death, determine if first aid is needed and provide assistance, if necessary, until emergency medical personnel arrive.
- B. An EMS unit is dispatched to assist the officer in determining the condition of the complainant. If it is apparent, after viewing the body, the complainant has expired due to violent causes, intentional or unintentional; the investigating officer follows these guidelines:
  - 1. Protect the scene, if location is known:
  - 2. Request a Crime Scene Unit Investigator be dispatched to the scene;
  - 3. Advise a supervisory officer of the situation and requests additional officers, if needed;
  - 4. Contact the Homicide Unit or Night CID Unit and gives them the pertinent information;
  - 5. Contact the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office; and
  - 6. Ensures the deceased is transported to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office by contract ambulance.
- C. When the deceased is a victim of an apparent suicide, suicide notes along with handwriting samples of the deceased, if available, are forwarded to the Bexar County Medical Examiner's Office.





### Procedure 704 – Apparent Sudden Deaths

D. Officers dispatched to a hospital to take a report of an apparent sudden death caused by violent means utilize the steps as outlined in .05B1-5 of this procedure.

### .06 VICTIM'S PROPERTY

- A. Valuables on the body of the deceased remain with the body when the body is transported to the Medical Examiner's Office. Valuables that are visible on the body are noted in the offense report.
- B. When the body of the deceased is transported to a hospital or funeral home, valuables on the body of the deceased are placed in the Property Room.
- C. Officers dispatched to a private residence to investigate an apparent sudden death secure the premises before leaving the scene and, if necessary, arrange for a patrol by for a period of five (5) days.

#### .07 NOTIFICATION OF LEGAL NEXT OF KIN

- A. The legal next of kin is fixed by law, and except in special circumstances that is the only person who can legally authorize certain acts, such as burial or cremation. Even though a relative may be present and notified of the death, the legal next of kin needs to be determined and that information should be included in the details of the report.
  - 1. Legal next of kin notification; suggested order of contact for an adult victim:
    - a. Spouse;
    - b. Adult children;
    - c. Parent or legal guardian;
    - d. Grandparents;
    - e. Adult brother or sister;
    - f. Adult aunt or uncle;
    - g. Adult nieces or nephews; or
    - h. Other adult relatives.
  - 2. Legal next of kin notification; suggested order of contact for a child victim:
    - a. Parent or guardian;
    - b. Grandparents;
    - c. Adult brother or sister;
    - d. Adult aunt or uncle; or
    - e. Other adult relative.
- B. In violent deaths, legal next of kin notification will be the responsibility of the Homicide Unit detective or Night CID Unit detective assigned to the investigation if the legal next of kin lives in Bexar County.





# Procedure 704 – Apparent Sudden Deaths

- Notification of violent deaths will be made as soon as possible in person by an investigating detective and a uniformed officer.
- 2. If an investigating detective is not on duty or available, a uniformed sergeant will make the notification in person. The uniformed sergeant should familiarize himself with the details of the case prior to notification.
- C. In deaths due to natural causes, legal next of kin notification will be the responsibility of the officer assigned to handle the report if the legal next of kin lives in Bexar County.
- D. If the victim has no relatives in Bexar County, the assigned officer notifies the Security Desk to dispatch essential information to the law enforcement agency closest to the home of the nearest legal next of kin.

#### .08 OFFENSE REPORTS

- A. All apparent sudden deaths, except traffic fatalities where no criminal charges are anticipated, are reported on an offense report. Traffic fatalities where no criminal charges are anticipated are reported on the Texas Peace Officer's Crash Report.
- B. Offense Report Offense/Event
  - 1. A death due to natural causes or a violent death caused by an unintentional act (i.e., drowning, electrocution, falling, etc.) is listed as "apparent sudden death".
  - 2. A violent death caused by a type of criminal homicide is listed according to the Penal Code number and title of the statue (i.e., 19.02, Murder; 19.04, Manslaughter; etc.).
  - 3. A violent death caused by suicide is listed as "apparent sudden death."
- C. The investigating officer includes all pertinent information relative to the situation and outlines all actions taken in the text of the offense report, as well as the names of officers notifying the next of kin and all individuals notified or contacted in relation to the death.

#### .09 HOSPICE ORGANIZATIONS

- A. Hospice organizations exist to provide in-home support and care for individuals in the last phase of an incurable disease.
- B. Hospice organizations have registered nurses on staff and on call twenty-four (24) hours a day to assist the families with patient care of the terminally ill. In such cases they are usually at the scene of the apparent sudden death.
- C. The hospice nurse is available to assist the officer in determining the condition of the complainant. EMS Unit personnel are not required to make the scene if a hospice nurse determines the complainant has expired. The name of the hospice nurse and his/her determination is noted in the officer's offense report.
- D. Hospice organizations prepare their patients' families for the required police investigation of an apparent sudden death. The information an officer needs to relay to the Medical Examiner's Office, in most cases, has already been prepared for the officer by the family.