



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY OPERATING PROCEDURES MANUAL		
CHAPTER 208	HUMAN DEATH INVESTIGATION	
	Effective: 03/20/2024	Commissioner Approval: 
	<b>Authorities:</b> <a href="#">AS 12.65.005</a> ; <a href="#">AS 47.10</a> ; <a href="#">AS 47.12</a> ; <a href="#">AS 12.65.020-025</a> ; <a href="#">AS 09.55.062</a> ; <a href="#">AS 13.52.200</a> ; <a href="#">AS 12.65.007</a> ; <a href="#">AS 18.50.230</a> ; <a href="#">AS 08.68.700</a> ; <a href="#">AS 18.08.089</a>	
	<b>Applicability:</b> ALL DEPARTMENTAL EMPLOYEES	
	<b>Special Instructions:</b> SEE CHAPTERS 124 AND 205	

## 208.100 INTRODUCTION

This chapter establishes the policies for response and investigation of human deaths that are discovered by or reported to an officer of the department and that is within the jurisdiction or area of responsibility of this agency or otherwise become the responsibility of this agency to investigate.

Nothing in this policy is intended to restrict an officer from conducting an investigation into a human death for any reason.

## 208.300 MANNER OF DEATH

**A. *Categories of deaths.*** For the purposes of this policy, deaths will fall into one of two major categories, criminal and non-criminal.

**B. *All deaths to be assessed thoroughly.*** All deaths discovered by or reported to an officer of the department will be thoroughly assessed as to the manner and circumstance of the death and a decision as to the type of response or investigation made.

## 208.310 NOTIFICATION OF HUMAN DEATH

**A. *Notification of State Medical Examiner (SME).*** As prescribed in [AS 12.65.005](#), deaths that are discovered by or reported to an officer of the department must be immediately reported to the SME when the death appears to have:

1. been caused by unknown or criminal means, during the commission of a crime, or by suicide, accident, or poisoning;
2. occurred under suspicious or unusual circumstances or occurred suddenly when the decedent was in apparent good health;
3. been unattended by a practicing physician or occurred less than 24 hours after the deceased was admitted to a medical facility;
4. been associated with a diagnostic or therapeutic procedure;
5. resulted from a disease that constitutes a threat to public health;
6. been caused by a disease, injury, or toxic agent resulting from employment;

7. occurred in a jail or corrections facility owned or operated by the state or a political subdivision of the state or in a facility for the placement of persons in the custody or under the supervision of the state;
8. occurred in a foster home;
9. occurred in a mental institution or mental health treatment facility;
10. occurred while the deceased was in the custody of, or was being taken into the custody of, the state or a political subdivision of the state or a public officer or agent of the state or a political subdivision of the state; or
11. been of a child under 18 years of age or under the legal custody of the Department of Health and Social Services, subject to the jurisdiction of AS 47.10 or AS 47.12, unless the:
  - a. child's death resulted from a natural disease process and was medically expected; and
  - b. the child was under supervised medical care during the 24 hours before the death.

**B. *Remains may not be moved without permission.*** As prescribed in [AS 12.65.005 C](#), the body of a person whose death has been or should be reported to the SME may not be moved or otherwise disturbed without the permission of the SME. The statewide death reporting line is (888) 332- 2373 or (888) DECEASE, or in Anchorage (907) 334-2356.

**C. *Notification of DPS and other personnel.*** Officers who discover or receive a report of a death will immediately notify their supervisor (See OPM 124.370). The officer and the supervisor will be responsible for determining the appropriate additional levels of notification depending on the manner and circumstance of the death.

At a minimum, the following notifications will be made depending on the manner and circumstance of the death:

1. Non-traffic criminal deaths.
  - a. Immediate verbal notification of the Commander and the on-call ABI investigator. Immediate commissioner's notification containing a synopsis of the event as currently understood. When appropriate, follow-up commissioner's notifications shall be transmitted as new information becomes available. This section also applies to any missing person case where there is a suspicion of foul play.
  - b. Immediate verbal notification of the on-call district attorney in accordance with local district attorney's office protocols.
  - c. The Commander will be responsible for deciding whether or not an immediate verbal notification needs to be made to division headquarters or to the Commissioner or whether the commissioner's notification will be sufficient. Immediate verbal notification must be made

whenever the death involves a high profile person, politically sensitive issues or if it is associated with a major event or human caused disaster.

2. Traffic related criminal deaths.
  - a. Immediate verbal notification of the Commander. Immediate commissioner's notification containing a synopsis of the event as currently understood. When appropriate, follow-up commissioner's notifications must be transmitted as new information becomes available.
  - b. Immediate verbal notification of the on-call district attorney in accordance with local district attorney's office protocols.
  - c. The Commander will be responsible for deciding whether or not an immediate verbal notification needs to be made to division headquarters or to the Commissioner or whether the commissioner's notification will be sufficient. Immediate verbal notification must be made whenever the death involves a high profile person, politically sensitive issues or if it is associated with a major event or human caused disaster.
3. Non-criminal unattended deaths including traffic, aircraft, and vessel related.
  - a. Except where the death results from a motor vehicle crash, or involves a high profile person or politically sensitive issues or if it is associated with a major event or human caused disaster, no immediate DPS notification is required. Commanders may establish local notification policies that impose additional requirements for notification of detachment personnel. Consult the standard operating procedures manual for your command for guidance.
  - b. An immediate commissioner's notification is required when the death involves a high profile person, politically sensitive issues, is associated with a traffic, aircraft, or vessel, is associated with a major event or human caused disaster, or if the member believes that dissemination of information concerning the death would be useful to those who receive commissioner's notifications.
4. Certain immediate notifications must be made to specific agencies depending on the type or circumstances of the death:
  - a. Deaths related to fire or explosion - Division of Fire and Life Safety Director (State Fire Marshal). The director is a recipient of commissioner's notifications. If a commissioner's notification is being sent that is sufficient unless there is a need to communicate additional information specifically to the State Fire Marshal.
  - b. Boating or diving deaths occurring on navigable waterways - U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). Per a memorandum of understanding, notification is made to the Department of Natural Resources, Office of Boating Safety, which is the liaison for the USCG.

- c. Deaths resulting from aircraft or public carrier accidents - the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).
- d. Deaths related to employment - OSHA and the Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Division of Labor Standards and Safety.
- e. Death on a military installation or death of a member of the military - the military investigative unit for the branch involved.
- f. Deaths occurring within the boundaries of a state or national park - the state or federal park ranger for the area involved.

#### **208.320 RESPONSIBILITY FOR INVESTIGATION OF DEATHS**

**A. *Deaths Involving Criminal Acts.*** A death involving a criminal act or suspected of involving a criminal act will always be fully investigated and reported to the district attorney's office for consideration of charges. Reporting the case to the district attorney's office is optional if no suspects are identified or all persons suspected of being responsible are also deceased.

- 1. To the extent possible, the Alaska Bureau of Investigation (ABI) will respond to and participate in all non-traffic related deaths caused by criminal acts. ABI will assume case responsibility for cases where they are the first responders and may assume case responsibility when they respond to assist depending on the complexity or sensitivity of the case and the desires of the detachment or division.
- 2. ABI may assist with the investigation of some traffic related deaths as circumstances dictate.

**B. *Unattended Non-criminal Deaths.*** A death not attended by a physician and not involving a criminal act will be fully investigated by the detachment, post or unit receiving the report or discovering the death except as provided for in the policy on expected home deaths. This type of death is commonly referred to as an "unattended death".

- 1. ABI may be consulted whenever an unusual or suspicious circumstance exists or when a death investigation may be more complex, occurs on government property, in a government conveyance or is politically sensitive.
- 2. ABI will assume responsibility for the investigation of a death not involving a criminal act when assigned by the commissioner's office or the AST division director.

#### **208.330 NOTIFICATION OF NEXT OF KIN**

**A. *Next-of-kin to be notified of death or potentially fatal injury.*** An officer will notify the next-of-kin, in person if possible, of a death or potentially fatal injury being investigated by DPS.

- 1. If the next-of-kin lives outside of the state, notification shall be made through the nearest law enforcement agency.

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2. Unless highly unusual circumstances exist, notification shall not be made until positive identification of the remains has been made.
3. If possible, officer shall enlist the assistance of relatives, neighbors, clergy, or family physicians when making notifications.
4. Officers making notifications shall exhibit tact, diplomacy, and shall be prepared to provide short-term support and assistance to the next-of-kin.

**B. *Family notification when remains are transported for autopsy purposes.*** When remains must be transported for autopsy, the immediate family member will be given the case number and contact information for the investigating officer. The immediate family member should be directed to the SME website for information – [Link to SME](#).

### 208.340 STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER DUTIES

**A. *Statutes and procedures covering SME's duties.*** AS 12.65.020 - 025 outlines the duties and authorities of the SME.

**B. *State Medical Examiner duties.*** The SME is responsible for forensic medical investigation including conducting autopsies and the determination of cause and manner of death throughout the state. The office supervises the staff working at the medical examiner facility and is responsible for that facility.

When an examination is performed by the SME's office, they will routinely take photographs, fingerprints, and toxicology specimens.

**C. *State Medical Examiner responsible for the transport of remains for examination.*** The SME is responsible for payment for and paperwork authorizing shipment of human remains for medical examiner purposes. Bills for transportation of human remains for medical examination purposes shall be addressed to:

State of Alaska  
Office of the State Medical Examiner  
5455 Dr Martin Luther King Jr Ave  
Anchorage, AK 99507

The SME's Office will fund only those services that are authorized in advance.

**D. *SME may request an inquiry.*** AS 12.65.020(c) provides that the SME or a prosecuting attorney may petition the court to hold a death inquest under AS 09.55.062 if the findings and conclusions of the SME, in the opinion of the SME or prosecuting attorney, warrant the inquest. Otherwise, the SME shall cause a certificate of death for the deceased person to be completed and filed as prescribed by law.

**208.350 DEATH INVESTIGATION RESPONSIBILITIES**

**A. *Officers responsible for quality of death investigation.*** Officers shall use appropriate investigative procedures when conducting death investigations. It is the officer's responsibility to seek assistance from supervisors, state attorneys, or forensic experts if they are uncertain concerning the technical or legal aspects of a death investigation and to cooperate with representatives of the SME's office.

**B. *Requesting autopsy and transporting remains.*** The extent of post-mortem examination is a determination made by the SME. When a homicide, suspected homicide, death without apparent cause, death with unusual circumstances or death with identification problems exists, communicate these facts and circumstances to the SME so that an appropriate examination may be undertaken.

**C. *Securing valuables found on body when body is to be transported for further examination.*** Leave property intact on the body for removal at the time of autopsy. The presence of property on the body shall be noted in the case report and photographed if possible. Avoid disturbing this evidence whenever possible.

**D. *Securing property and animals belonging to the deceased.*** An officer will not knowingly leave valuable property or animals unattended or unsecured.

1. Responding officers will make every attempt to locate a responsible party to take possession and responsibility for property of the deceased.
2. Potential property custodians shall be provided the appropriate Alaska Court System forms for signature (see attachments). The facts surrounding the property release will be documented in the case report.
3. If no property custodian can be located, this fact will also be recorded in the case report.
4. Absent a qualified property custodian, the responding officer must make sure that appropriate steps to secure the deceased person's property have been taken. The officer's efforts must be clearly documented in the case report. Officers will describe the measures they took to secure the property such as padlocking doors, locking vehicles, storing property in locked buildings etc.
  - a. Photographs depicting security measures taken shall accompany the report.
  - b. Property unsecured in plain view or easily accessible, such as cash, guns, jewelry, prescription medications, etc. will be seized for safekeeping if no custodian has been identified. All items seized will be individually inventoried and documented on a property form as part of the police report.
  - c. Attempts must be made to contact animal control, animal rescue agencies, or others who might be able to provide temporary or even long-term care for pets or livestock.

**E. *Requirements Regarding Anatomical Gifts.*** AS 13.52.213 requires that a law enforcement officer, fire fighter, paramedic, or other emergency rescuer make a reasonable search for a document of gift or other information identifying the bearer as a donor or as an individual who has refused to make an anatomical gift when participating in an incident involving a death or when dealing with an individual believed to be near death. This includes a death involving a criminal act. While a death involving a criminal act does not ultimately preclude organ donation, collection and preservation of investigative evidence always takes precedence.

1. If a document or other evidence identifying the bearer as a donor or as an individual who has refused to make an anatomical gift is located and the subject is being taken to a medical treatment facility or to the SME's office, the receiving facility shall be informed of the existence of the document or evidence and the document or evidence or a legible copy thereof shall be provided to the receiving facility. Additional notification of a procurement organization is optional.
2. If a document or other evidence identifying the bearer as a donor or as an individual who has refused to make an anatomical gift is located and the subject is not being taken to a medical treatment facility or to the SME's office, the officer shall notify a procurement organization. The document or evidence identifying the bearer as a donor or as an individual who has refused to make an anatomical gift or a legible copy thereof shall be provided. The primary procurement organization serving Alaska is Life Alaska Donor Services. Life Alaska Donor Services may be contacted at the following:  
  
Life Alaska Donor Services  
235 E 8<sup>th</sup> Av, Suite 100  
Anchorage, AK 99501  
Phone: (907) 562-LIFE (5433), Toll-free in Alaska: 1-800-719-LIFE (5433)  
Fax: (907) 562-5333
3. A record of the notification of the medical treatment facility, the SME or a procurement organization shall be made in the officer's notebook and in the police report if a police report is being completed to document the incident.

#### **208.360 TRANSPORT OF BODIES FOR AUTOPSY**

**A. *Protective gear to be worn when handling remains.*** Protective gear will be worn when handling remains to prevent contact with blood or other body fluids and cross-contamination of evidence (See OPM 205).

**B. *Remains to be packaged to preserve any evidence present.*** Each body must be treated as an independent crime scene where valuable evidence may be present in a number of forms. Some critical evidence may not be readily visible to the naked eye. Remains must be handled and packaged carefully to preserve any evidence adhering to the body or to clothing.

The following protocol provides the highest probability that critical evidence will be preserved for later collection following transport of remains. They may vary depending on the particular

circumstances of each case or upon direction of an investigator or supervisor. The on-call ABI investigator should be consulted prior to proceeding if there are any questions about how to proceed or if any unusual circumstances exist where additional guidance is needed.

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

2. Package the remains:

- a. The preferred method is to place the body into a new, unused plastic body bag liner. The liner must not have been previously used for any purpose and must be free of any inadvertent contamination.
- b. The remains must be carefully placed into the liner with as little movement as possible and must be kept in the same position as originally found to the extent possible. For example, a body found face down must be packaged face down. A body frozen or fixed in an odd position must be packaged in the same position without attempts to reposition limbs or other body parts if packaging and transportation methods will allow.
- c. Firmly attach a completed evidence tag to the body bag liner.
- d. If a new plastic body bag liner is not available, a white cotton linen bed sheet that is unused and in its original packaging may be used to package the body.
- e. Again, preserving the position of the body as discovered to the extent possible, the body must be placed centered on the sheet and in the same position as found.
- f. The edges of the sheet shall be brought together and firmly stapled to fully enclose the body.
- g. The original packaging from the sheet must be placed in a securely closed paper bag and shipped with the body but not inside the bed sheet.

3. Transport the remains:

- a. Carefully place the packaged body into an outer body bag. A new, unused outer body bag is preferable.
- b. Ship or transport the remains in accordance with all other requirements involved in the transport of human remains. Utilize the transport or



shipping method that is the most direct and the least likely to disrupt the condition of the remains or any evidence that may be with the remains. Ensure that chain of custody is considered and that arrangements are in place to receive and process the remains once it reaches its destination.

**C. *Transporting remains on commercial aircraft.*** If remains are to be transported on a commercial aircraft, they shall be enclosed in a sealed metal container, which is available through the SME's office.

**D. *Remains will be treated as evidence.*** In order to preserve the evidentiary value of remains the outermost shipping container or bag shall be sealed with evidence tape or secured by some other means. Chain of custody should be accounted for and documented as appropriate.

#### 208.370 AUTOPSIES

**A. *Officers or other assigned departmental personnel to attend autopsies in certain cases.*** Officers or other assigned departmental personnel will or may attend an autopsy:

1. for homicide, suspected homicide, or suicide victims;
2. when a death is unclear or has unusual circumstances;
3. if a driver may be charged with a criminal offense;
4. when the body is unidentifiable;
5. multiple bodies are commingled; or
6. if the investigating unit Commander feels that autopsy attendance is necessary or desirable.

**B. *Forms required for autopsy.*** If a body is sent for autopsy, an [Autopsy Request Form](#) (12-248) will be completed, placed in an envelope, and secured to the outermost shipping container or bag. A copy of the form must be retained with the case file and faxed to the SME's office at (907) 334- 2216 and to ABI at (907) 269-0732.

**C. *Notification required if ABI to attend autopsy.*** When an autopsy has been requested which will require ABI attendance, the Commander or his designee will immediately notify the on-call ABI investigator and shall provide information on the manner and circumstances of death and any special investigative requests.

**D. *Investigating officer may be directed to attend autopsy.*** The case officer may be directed to travel to attend an autopsy when desired by the Commander or when requested by the ABI commander.

**E. *Responsibility to secure money or valuables found on body.*** With the approval of the SME, the officer or other assigned departmental personnel attending an autopsy may inventory

and take into possession any money or valuable property found on the body or the accompanying clothing.

1. Property with the body shall be noted in the officer's or other assigned departmental personnel report along with the disposition of that property. If possible, photographs should be taken to document the location and condition of any property found.
2. Items seized, as evidence, will be identified with an evidence tag showing the chain of custody, and so noted on a property form to be made part of the case report. Items contaminated with bodily fluids must be labeled with a biohazard label and packaged appropriately.
3. Unless taken by the officer as evidence, clothing of the deceased will be held at the SME facility for three working days after completion of the examination. At the end of that time clothing will be destroyed as a biohazard unless specifically requested by next of kin. When the next of kin requests the clothing, they will be required to sign a release for the clothing that documents the presence of a biohazard.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**I. *Departmental personnel attending autopsy shall coordinate evidence collection with pathologist.*** The individual shall coordinate the collection of evidence and the use of equipment with the attending pathologist so as not to interfere with the medical determination of death and so as to ensure proper collection of evidence or taking of photographs prior to medical examination activities after which the opportunity or ability might be lost or degraded.

**J. *Autopsy attendants to use protective equipment.*** Protective gear, including gloves, gowns, booties, goggles, and masks, will be worn when attending autopsies to prevent contact with blood or other body fluids. See the Bloodborne Pathogens Exposure Control Plan ([BBPECP](#)) for additional information and requirements on universal precautions and special procedures applicable to autopsies.

#### **208.380 NOTICE OF EXPECTED HOME DEATH**

Upon receipt of an expected home death form or document from a physician, the receiving officer will ensure that the form or document contains sufficient information to meet the requirements of AS 12.65.007 and ensure that any missing information is added before transmitting the form to other agencies. Copies of the form will be immediately provided to the law enforcement dispatch center(s) responsible for the area, the SME's office, agencies that provide emergency medical response in the area, and added to briefing information to insure that all personnel are aware.

#### **208.390 ASSESSMENT AND INVESTIGATION OF AN EXPECTED HOME DEATH**

**A. *Policy Exception for Expected Home Deaths.*** Expected home deaths as described in AS 12.65.007 are an exception to the requirement to respond to and fully investigate unattended deaths that did not result from a criminal act. An officer discovering or receiving a report of an unattended death that did not result from a criminal act may elect to not respond or investigate the death if it meets the requirements to qualify as an expected home death and certain legal and circumstantial factors can be established.





[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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**D. Medical examiner notification.** In the event of an expected home death, the SME's office will have been provided with a copy of the expected home death form or document from the person's physician and will not need to be notified by the investigating officer. Nor is it necessary for the SME's office to give permission prior to moving the remains. However, an officer may contact the SME's office with questions or concerns in an expected home death.

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**F. *Commanders encouraged to establish programs.*** Commanders are encouraged to establish formal expected home death programs in any area where one does not already exist. Established programs can help to streamline the processes involved and ease the burden on all who must be involved.

**H. *Notifications.*** The policy on notifications required for non-criminal unattended deaths applies to expected home deaths.

## REOURCES

Autopsy Request form, 12-248 (1 page) – [Link to Form](#)

Information for Families and Friends, Frequently Asked Questions – [Link to FAQs](#)

Funeral Homes – SME listing – [Link to listing](#)

Alaska Court System (ACS) Property Release Affidavit, P-120 – [Link to Form](#)

ACS Property Inventory, P-121 – [Link to Form](#)

ACS Application for Appointment as Temporary Property Custodian, P-130 – [Link to Form](#)