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Death Investigations

Over the past few years, the Sheriff's Office has seen a large influx of new deputies successfully completing FTO and being assigned to a patrol position. Also, there has been a steady increase in homicides occurring in Kern County. Many death investigations are very clear-cut. However, there are certainly some death investigations that are not so simple, some of which are determined to be a homicide after the initial investigation.

For these reasons, it is important to ensure death investigations are completed thoroughly, regardless of the suspected cause of death. The importance of the preliminary investigation cannot be overstated. Not only does it form the foundation for further investigative efforts, but also, for most crimes, it represents the only investigation that is conducted. As such, it is imperative the investigation is as thorough as possible, and the subsequent crime reports are accurate and complete.

In an effort to enhance/refresh investigative skills, the following is a guideline for death investigations. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but can be used as a reference:

- Determine the extent of victim's injuries and render appropriate aid when necessary.
- Attempt to locate and apprehend likely suspects.
- Maintain security of the crime scene.
 - This includes establishing an inner and outer perimeter.
 - Start a crime scene log documenting all personnel within the scene, as well as coming or going. Medical personnel should be included in this crime scene log, as well as who pronounces the victim deceased, if applicable.
- Until relieved by a Homicide supervisor, the deputy shall maintain strict security of the crime scene.
- If you are responding to an obvious death, please limit the number of medical/fire personnel in the scene, if they are necessary at all. This includes limiting KCSO personnel to only those necessary to maintain the integrity of the scene.
- Try to prevent medical/fire personnel from covering the body. This makes it more difficult to investigate and requires scene processing to be done twice. It also contaminates the body.

- Perform an area canvas in an attempt to locate witnesses to the crime and document who you speak to. Also, check for potential additional victims during this time. During the canvas, search for potential evidence:
 - Video surveillance
 - Discarded weapons
 - Blood trail
 - Drag marks
 - Collateral property damage (i.e. bullet strikes)
 - Interview witnesses and family members for full disclosure of the event and gather all possible suspect identifiers.
 - This may be a short statement to be provided to detectives for further interviews if it is known there will be a Homicide Detective response, but there should be at least an initial statement obtained.
 - It is preferred that this statement is recorded, even if detectives are called out. This preserves key statements.
 - If there is not a Homicide Detective callout, a full recorded statement should be obtained.
 - Obtain complete identifying information for contacts/witnesses.
 - Attempt to identify the decedent without searching the decedent's person for identification.
 - Any person who searches for or removes any papers, moneys, valuable property or weapons constituting the estate of the deceased from the person of the deceased or from the premises, prior to arrival of the coroner or without the permission of the coroner, is guilty of a misdemeanor (Government Code 27491.3 (c)).
 - A peace officer may search the person or property on or about the person of the deceased, whose death is due to a traffic accident, for a driver's license or identification card to determine if an anatomical donor card is attached. If a peace officer locates such an anatomical donor card which indicates that the deceased is an anatomical donor, the peace officer shall immediately furnish such information to the coroner having jurisdiction (Government Code 27491.3 (d)).
 - Good photographs should be taken of the entire scene if there is not going to be a detective response. This can be accomplished by deputies on scene or with the assistance of Crime Scene Technicians. It is better to take more photographs than not enough.
 - Overall photographs
 - Medium-Range photographs
 - Close-Range photographs
 - If there is a firearm involved, the condition of the firearm needs to be thoroughly documented, including the loaded status, magazine status and any obvious blood
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or tissue located on the weapon. **The firearm should only be handled in the gravest of circumstances such as when it poses an immediate threat to officers (i.e. removing firearm from suspect's hand).**

- If a weapon, other than a firearm, is involved, it should be left in place if at all possible. If it must be moved, do so using new latex/nitrile gloves. In the event a weapon or other evidence is moved bare handed in an emergency, document what occurred in a report and notify the responding Detective Sergeant. **The weapon should only be handled in the gravest of circumstances such as when it poses an immediate threat to officers (i.e. removing weapon from suspect's hand).**
- It is the deputy's responsibility to initiate homicide proceedings by notifying their supervisor, who will notify the Communications Center. This should be done if the victim is deceased or highly likely to succumb to their injuries.
- The Coroner is to be notified of the death by the Communications Center simultaneously at the time the Patrol Sergeant or Homicide Sergeant are notified. Any person who does not notify the coroner immediately as required by this section is guilty of misdemeanor GC27491.
- The deputy on scene is to provide a complete and accurate investigative report based on the information they have obtained.

Upon the arrival of detectives, there will be a briefing as the investigation is transitioned from patrol to detectives. Generally, you will provide:

- Case number, time of call and RP information.
- Summary of what has taken place and information obtained thus far.
- Identity of the victims and witnesses, and what they have said.
- Any potential significant evidence, such as the location of bloody clothing or video surveillance, should be pointed out during the briefing.
- It will also be noted at this time which deputies will complete the initial and supplemental reports.

If deputies on scene of a death investigation are unable to determine it is a non-homicidal death (i.e. accidental, suicide, overdose, natural, etc.) they should contact their immediate supervisor for guidance and continue a parallel investigation with the coroner. The coroner has a mandated duty to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner, and cause of all violent, sudden, or unusual deaths, GC 27491. Some death scene investigations have an unknown cause/manner of death until the autopsy is performed. Therefore, a parallel investigation ensures both deputy and coroner death scene investigations are completed at the time of death. The cause of death is determined after the autopsy; however, the manner of death is determined from the strength of the investigation.

Patrol Sergeants may also contact the Homicide Sergeant during normal business hours or the on-call Detective Sergeant after hours.

IMPORTANT

Please **SIGN IN** to acknowledge your reading after
reviewing the Training Bulletin

I have read and understand Training Bulletin 21-19 Death Investigations dated May 28, 2021.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name: _____ CAD ID #: _____