General Order

Houston Police Department

ISSUE DATE:	NO.
March 23, 2023	600-07

REFERENCE: Supersedes all prior conflicting Circulars and Directives, and General Order 600-07, dated August 6, 2013.

SUBJECT: DEATH INVESTIGATIONS

POLICY

Officers may be called upon to handle situations in which there is a dead human body present. Officers shall display the highest regard for human remains and handle dead bodies in such a manner that provides for a thorough criminal and/or forensic examination.

This General Order applies to all employees.

1 GENERAL PROCEDURES

The officer shall request emergency medical services to the scene to make the determination that the person is actually deceased. The officer shall contact and coordinate with Homicide Division for all deaths investigated inside the city limits of Houston. The officer shall also contact and coordinate with the appropriate county's medical examiner's office. For death investigations in Harris County, officers shall contact the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences. For death investigations in Fort Bend County, officers shall contact the Fort Bend County Medical Examiner's Office. For death investigations in Montgomery County, officers shall contact the Montgomery County Forensic Services Office.

Officers shall adhere to the requirements of General Order 600-27, **Preliminary and Follow-Up Investigations**. Officers shall not intentionally touch, handle, or disturb any evidence and/or weapon that is part of a scene involving a possible homicide, fatal or possible fatal officer-involved shooting, or suspicious death without the express consent of both the medical examiner (or designee) and Homicide Division personnel, or unless one of the following exceptions applies:

a. There is no other way to preserve the item from loss or destruction.

b. The item poses an immediate and articulable threat to the officer or public safety and there is no other way to secure the item (e.g., a hostile scene where others have uncontrolled access).

The officer shall collect and handle any property and/or evidence, in accordance with General Order 700-01, **Property and Evidence Control Regulations**, that Homicide Division or medical examiner investigators are not handling.

Officers shall not touch or search a dead body or clothing worn by the decedent without the express consent of the medical examiner (or designee) and Homicide Division personnel. Officers shall not disturb or remove a dead body or body part from where it was found without the express consent of the medical examiner or designee, or unless one of the following exceptions applies:

c. There is no other way to preserve the body from loss or destruction.

d. There is no other way to maintain traffic flow on a highway, across a railroad line, or at an airport.

Return to Service

The officer shall remain with the body until the medical examiner or designee retrieves the body, or until the officer is relieved by another peace officer. With approval from a supervisor, the officer may immediately return to service if all the following apply:

a. The investigation involves a natural death with no suspicious circumstances.

b. The officer has completed the on-scene investigation, contacted Homicide Division and the appropriate medical examiner's office, and there will be no response to the scene by either.

c. The funeral home has been notified and a point of contact from the funeral home has been established.

d. The officer does not believe that leaving the body would form the basis of a disturbance.

e. An adult, other than the person who discovered the decedent, is willing to remain at the scene.

f. The attending physician is willing to sign the death certificate.

g. The body is not exposed to public view.

2 BODIES EXPOSED TO PUBLIC VIEW

Officers shall protect a dead human body that is exposed to public view by way of extending the scene perimeter, as practical, to inhibit the public's view of the decedent until the medical examiner or designee arrives. Officers should use available resources (e.g., patrol vehicles) to obscure the public's view when it is not practical to extend the scene perimeter.

Officers shall not use a body sheet to cover a dead body or body part unless one of the following exceptions applies:

a. It is absolutely necessary to maintain the integrity of the crime scene, body, or body part during extenuating circumstances (e.g., inclement weather).

b. If failure to do so would form the basis of a disturbance and covering the body or body part would help in maintaining peace and order.

The Logistic Division's Uniform Supply Unit shall stock and issue body sheets to all divisions that have marked vehicles in their fleet. Division commanders shall ensure that all the division's marked vehicles carry body sheets. A division commander may also request body sheets from Uniform Supply for unmarked vehicles.

Troy Finner
Chief of Police