

### **What is a death certificate and how can I obtain a copy of it?**

A death certificate is an official, legal document and vital record that states the cause and manner of death. If an autopsy is performed, the final death certificate may not be available until the autopsy and all tests have been completed; in such cases, a “pending” death certificate may be requested from your funeral service provider. Copies of the death certificate are generally obtained through your funeral service provider of choice.

### **How do I get the personal effects of my loved one?**

Personal property that was held by the medical examiner investigator generally will be returned to your funeral service provider when it is no longer needed for the investigation. Please contact your funeral service provider in order to collect your loved one’s belongings. If law enforcement retained any personal property, you will need to contact the appropriate agency directly.

### **What if I have questions?**

The Medical Examiner’s Office is available to discuss any further questions or concerns you may have. You may contact the office directly at *414-223-1200*.

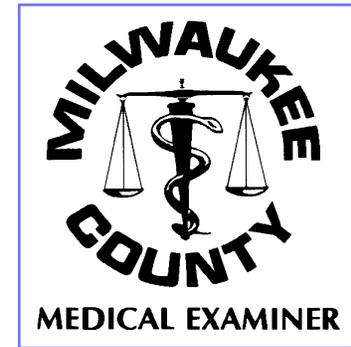
### **Resources:**

Milwaukee County Burial Assistance  
*414-289-6714*

Infant Death Center of Wisconsin  
*414-292-4046*

24-Hour Crisis Line  
*414-257-7222*

Aging Resource Center of Milwaukee County  
*414-289-6874*



933 West Highland Avenue  
Milwaukee, WI 53233  
Telephone: 414-223-1200  
Fax: 414-223-1237

[www.county.milwaukee.gov/medicalexaminer](http://www.county.milwaukee.gov/medicalexaminer)

### **Our Mission:**

- To promote and maintain the highest professional standards in the field of death investigation
- To provide timely, accurate and legally defensible determinations as to the cause of death
- To enhance public health and safety through reducing the incidence of preventable deaths
- To foster public awareness and support the advancement of professional medical and legal education
- To protect the interests of deceased individuals, their loved ones, and the communities we serve

### **Why is the Medical Examiner involved in this death?**

Pursuant to Wisconsin State Statute 979.01, the Medical Examiner's Office is required to investigate all unexplained, unusual, or suspicious deaths; homicides, suicides, or accidents; maternal deaths following abortion; deaths due to poisoning; deaths without physician or accredited practitioner in attendance; deaths when physician is unwilling or unable to sign death certificate; deaths of inmates in public institutions; deaths as a result of diagnostic procedures; deaths due to neglect; unattended deaths of fetuses of 20 weeks or older; occupational-related deaths; sudden/unexpected death of infants or children under age 2 years.

### **The primary function of the Medical Examiner's Office is to determine a truthful, logical and scientifically unbiased cause and manner of death.**

- "Cause of death" is defined as the disease or injury that sets in motion the chain of events which ultimately results in the death of an individual.
- "Manner of death" is classified into five categories: natural, accident, suicide, homicide and undetermined. The manner of death is determined by the circumstances of the death.

### **I would like to have my loved one's organs/tissues donated. Will medical examiner involvement keep this from happening?**

The Medical Examiner's Office is required to notify the Wisconsin Donor Network of cases in which we have jurisdiction. We fully support organ, tissue, and eye donation and work closely with the Wisconsin Donor Network, Wisconsin Tissue Bank, and Lions Eye Bank.

### **What is an autopsy?**

An autopsy is a detailed medical examination of a person's body and organs after death. The function of the autopsy is to help establish a cause and manner of death by fully identifying and describing diseases or injuries that caused death. The autopsy is performed or supervised by a forensic pathologist (a pathologist with specialized training in recognizing, interpreting, and documenting features of injury and disease). Surgical techniques are used to remove and examine each organ, while tissues and blood samples are selected for microscopic examination and toxicology testing. In some cases it may be necessary to retain larger portions of tissues or even whole organs, such as when the brain needs to be examined in detail. After this examination, which may require many weeks, the residual tissues are retained in a manner similar to the retention of other autopsy specimens. Normally such tissues are cremated, similar to specimens removed in the operating room, as returning the tissues and/or organs would entail significant delay and expense to families. If you want those tissues returned after examination, it will be necessary for you to contact the Medical Examiner's Office to make appropriate arrangements. Although there is no charge for an autopsy ordered by the Medical Examiner, transportation, administrative, and storage charges may apply, if applicable.

### **Why/When is an autopsy needed?**

Not all cases require an autopsy. In many circumstances, the medical examiner is able to determine the cause and manner of death from the medical history and the investigation. Autopsies are ordered by the medical examiner based upon his/her medical opinion that an autopsy is needed to assist in determining the cause and manner of death. In some instances, an autopsy may be required by law due to the circumstances surrounding the death.

### **Where will the autopsy take place and how do I get a copy of the autopsy report?**

The Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's office is located at 933 West Highland Avenue. Although business hours are 9:00-5:00, the office is staffed by investigators 24 hours a day. The medical examiner investigator will inform you when the autopsy will take place.

The final autopsy report is available at no cost to the immediate and legal next-of-kin (power of attorney, spouse, adult child, parent, adult sibling, grandparent, guardian). It generally takes at least 4-6 weeks from the date of the autopsy for the report to become available. You may obtain a copy of the final autopsy report by contacting the Medical Examiner's Office at 414-223-1200.

### **Will an autopsy impact funeral services?**

An autopsy generally does not delay funeral services and does not prevent the option of viewing your loved one by family and friends

### **How do I choose a funeral service provider?**

Due to Wisconsin law, the Medical Examiner's Office is unable to provide you with recommendations for funeral service providers. We recommend contacting your local funeral service providers to inquire about their services

Cleanup at death scenes may involve the removal of biohazardous materials that require specialized cleaning methods. While the Medical Examiner's Office is unable to recommend a specific cleanup service, a list of biohazard cleanup services is available on our web site:

[www.county.milwaukee.gov/medicalexaminer](http://www.county.milwaukee.gov/medicalexaminer).