

Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office

Frequently Asked Questions and Information for Families



Mission of the Medical Examiner's Office

The mission of the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office (UCMEO) is to protect the health and safety of our community by providing objective, comprehensive medicolegal investigations and establishing an accurate, legally defensible cause and manner of death for all unnatural, unattended, and unexpected deaths that occur within Ulster County. Our objectives are to serve the public in a professional, confidential, and courteous manner, to work diligently to determine the cause and manner of death of our constituents, and to convey those findings in a timely fashion to legal next-of-kin and to the appropriate agencies in the health and legal communities that may have ongoing concerns related to the deceased and their survivors.

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What is a medical examiner?

A Medical Examiner is a medical doctor, usually a forensic pathologist. The Medical Examiner certifies the cause and manner of death based on their opinion following an investigation and medical examination. This examination may include an autopsy and laboratory tests such as toxicology. The Medical Examiner also completes a report and creates a file for each decedent to document their findings. The Medical Examiner’s team consists of many other individuals who assist in various ways with the investigation, administrative tasks, and autopsies; these individuals include Medicolegal Investigators, Forensic Autopsy Technicians, and other office staff.

What is the difference between a medical examiner and a coroner?

Medical Examiners and Coroners are distinct titles referring to individuals who complete somewhat similar or overlapping roles but have very different histories and current-day training and qualifications. Coroners have existed for centuries, with the term originally referring to the "Crown", whose job was to ensure that the appropriate taxes were paid to the King (Crown) upon death. Modern coroners are elected laypersons who may or may not have medical training and whose principal duty is to inquire by an inquest into the cause of any death which fall under their jurisdiction as prescribed by law. A medical examiner is an appointed public officer whose duties are similar to those of a coroner, but who must be a physician with specialized training in medicolegal death investigation.

Why is the Medical Examiner involved?

[New York State County Law](#) requires that the Medical Examiner investigate the circumstances and determine the cause and manner of all deaths that are or appear to be:

- A violent death, whether by criminal violence, suicide or casualty;
- A death caused by unlawful act or criminal neglect;
- A death occurring in a suspicious, unusual or unexplained manner;
- A death caused by suspected criminal abortion;
- A death while unattended by a physician, so far as can be discovered, or where no physician able to certify the cause of death as provided in the public health law and in form as prescribed by the commissioner of health can be found;
- A death of a person confined in a public institution other than a hospital, infirmary or nursing home.

What is an autopsy and who decides if one will be performed?

An autopsy is a surgical procedure which consists of a thorough external and internal examination of the deceased. Internal organs are inspected for indications of injury or natural disease processes. Various tissues and fluid specimens may be collected for testing to determine the cause and manner of death. Tissues, and in a few specific types of cases, whole organs may be retained by the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office for diagnostic testing. These specimens are subsequently destroyed in the same manner as surgical specimens in a hospital unless other arrangements have been made by the legal next-of-kin.

The Medical Examiner will determine to what extent an examination is necessary to determine cause and manner of death. A decision of whether or not an autopsy is necessary will be made after gathering initial information regarding the circumstances surrounding the death. An autopsy may not be required when adequate medical history exists to document the illness or injury leading to the death and there are no signs of foul play. In these cases, an external examination including collection of specimens for laboratory testing may be all that is necessary. In most cases, information gathered from an autopsy will not only establish the cause and manner of death but may also assist in the grieving process, uncover familial diseases, provide evidence for settlement of death benefits, and aid in adjudication of criminal cases.

Is family consent required for an autopsy?

No. Examinations deemed necessary by the Medical Examiner do not require consent from the next-of-kin. However, if the legal next-of-kin's wishes indicate that no autopsy be performed, this office will review the request on a case-by-case basis.

Will I still be able to have an open casket funeral if an autopsy is performed?

Yes, autopsies are performed in a manner that does not interfere with viewing of the deceased in a normal case.

Do I have to pay for an autopsy to be performed?

Autopsies that are performed under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner, as necessary to determine cause and manner of death, are conducted at the expense of the Ulster County Government. The UCMEO does not perform "private autopsies", or autopsies outside of Medical Examiner jurisdiction.

What is meant by next-of-kin?

Next-of-kin is defined as the closest living relative of a person who has died. The next-of-kin has the right to control the disposition of the remains and is prioritized in the following order, pursuant to Section 4201 of the New York State Public Health Law:

- Person designated in written instrument;
- Spouse;
- Domestic Partner;
- Any child 18 or older;
- Either parent;
- Any brother or sister 18 or older;
- Authorized guardian;
- Person 18 or older now eligible to receive an estate distribution, in the following order:
 - Grandchildren;
 - Great-Grandchildren;
 - Nieces and nephews;
 - Grand-nieces and Grand-nephews;
 - Grandparents;
 - Aunts and Uncles;
 - First cousins;
 - Great-grandchildren of Grandparents;
 - Second cousins;
- Fiduciary (Executor);
- Close friend or other relative who is reasonably familiar with the decedent's wishes, including his or her religious or moral beliefs, when no one higher on the list is available, willing, or competent to act;
- Public Administrator.

Where will my relative/friend be examined?

The deceased will be transported to the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office autopsy facility located at the Broadway Campus of HealthAlliance Hospital, 396 Broadway, Kingston, New York 12401. The deceased will remain at our facility until examination of the body is complete, at which time the deceased will be released to the funeral home selected by next-of-kin. The investigation may continue after the release of the body to the funeral director.

Is it necessary for me to come to the Medical Examiner's Office to view the body?

No, visual identification at our office is not necessary. Our office cannot accommodate requests for viewing of the decedent at our facility. Please speak with your funeral director regarding viewing of the decedent at the funeral home where arrangements will be completed.

How long will it take before the deceased is released from the Medical Examiner's Office?

Depending on the time of day the deceased is received at the Medical Examiner's Office, they may be released the same day, or within the next two days. In rare cases of suspicious deaths, or in deaths that require further investigation, the deceased may be held for additional time. It is our goal to release all decedents within 72 hours of arrival.

What happens to the clothing and property of the deceased?

Any clothing or valuable property on the decedent at the time of death is transported with the decedent to our autopsy facility, where it is inventoried and subsequently released to the funeral director to be returned to the family. In some instances, property may be retained for evaluation as evidence. If this is the case with respect to your loss, you will be informed accordingly by this office, law enforcement personnel, or your funeral director. In rare circumstances, clothing may be disposed of as medical waste if severe biological contamination is present.

When will the autopsy report be available?

Autopsy reports are generally available within 90 days from the date of autopsy. The autopsy report is available to the legal next-of-kin and may be requested by completion of the Affidavit for Final Autopsy Report Request, found on our website. This original affidavit must be signed by legal next-of-kin, notarized, and returned to our office by mail or fax. There is no fee for an autopsy report sent directly to the next-of-kin. Other entities such as attorneys and insurance companies may receive autopsy reports on behalf of a client. Requests on behalf of a client must include a signed Office of Court Administration (OCA) Official Form No. 960 "Authorization for Release of Health Information Pursuant to HIPAA;" a fee is required.

Will organ or tissue donation be possible if a death occurs under medical examiner jurisdiction?

The Medical Examiner's Office supports efforts to promote organ and tissue donation. Only the next-of-kin can grant permission to the organ procurement agency for organ or tissue donation. In rare instances, to protect forensic evidence, the Medical Examiner may restrict certain aspects of the organ or tissue procurement procedure. The Ulster County Medical Examiner will notify the organ procurement agency where appropriate.

After the examination/autopsy, how are arrangements made for the release of the decedent?

The funeral director, chosen by the family, will contact the Medical Examiner's Office and make all the necessary arrangements for the release of the decedent and transport to the funeral home. The decedent will be released after the examination is complete.

What if I cannot afford funeral costs?

Advise your funeral director if you cannot afford funeral costs. They may be able to obtain help for you through the Department of Social Services or, if the deceased is a Veteran, from the Department of Veteran Affairs.

What is a death certificate and where can I obtain one?

A death certificate is a legal document that records the official date, time, location, cause and manner of a person's death. A death certificate is needed to bury or cremate remains, claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle estates, and pursue civil or criminal legal action.

The original death certificate is filed by the funeral director in the Registrar's Office respective to the municipality where the death occurred. The Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office does not issue death certificates. Next-of-kin and others legally entitled to receive a copy of the death certificate may obtain one from the Registrar's Office in the city, town, or village where the death occurred or from the funeral director who handled funeral arrangements. More information can be obtained from the New York State Bureau of Vital Records at (855) 322-1022 or https://www.health.ny.gov/vital_records/.

What does it mean if the death certificate reads "Pending Investigation"?

A death certificate is completed after the examination is completed. Occasionally, additional laboratory testing or other investigation is required before cause and manner of death are determined. In these cases, a death certificate with a cause of death "pending further studies" and or manner of death "pending investigation" may be completed. This preliminary death certificate allows your family to make immediate funeral arrangements. An amended death certificate will then be issued upon completion of additional testing and/or investigation.

Other Questions?

If you have any further questions or wish to speak to a member of our office, please feel free to call us at (845) 340-3009, Monday through Friday, between the hours of 9:00 AM and 5:00 PM.