



ULSTER COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

239 Golden Hill Lane, Kingston, NY 12401-6441, (845) 340-3150, Fax (845) 334-8337

PATRICK K. RYAN

County Executive

CAROL M. SMITH, MD, MPH

Commissioner of Health and Mental Health

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

This attachment has been compiled by the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office to offer some helpful insights and suggestions for the families we serve.

MISSION

It is the mission of the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office to serve the public in a professional, confidential, and courteous manner in the medico-legal investigation of deaths in Ulster County, thereby enhancing our understanding of death and dying. Our objectives are to work diligently to determine the cause and manner of death of our constituents, and to convey those findings in a timely fashion to families and to such agencies in the health and legal communities that have ongoing concerns related to the deceased and their survivors.

What is the function of the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office?

A Medical Examiner's Office is a medicolegal office charged by NY State law to investigate certain deaths.

What does medicolegal mean?

Medicolegal is something that involves both medical and legal aspects, mainly: Medical jurisprudence, a branch of medicine.

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

A coroner is usually elected public officer who is typically not required to have specific medical qualifications and whose principal duty is to inquire by an inquest into the cause of any death which fall under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner's office.

A medical examiner is usually an appointed public officer whose duties are similar to those of a coroner but who is typically required to have specific medical training and may be qualified to conduct medical examinations and autopsies.

What happens when a death is reported to the Medical Examiner's office?

<http://codes.findlaw.com/ny/county-law/cnt-sect-674.html> (Hyperlink should say Manner of Investigation)

Which deaths fall under the jurisdiction of the medical examiner?

The Medical Examiner is required by New York State County Law Article 17-A (section 673) to examine and investigate deaths that appear to be;

- (a) A violent death, e.g. motor vehicle accident, criminal violence, industrial accident;
- (b) A death caused by unlawful act or criminal neglect;
- (c) A death occurring in a suspicious, unusual or unexplained manner;
- (d) A death caused by suspected criminal abortion;
- (e) 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;
- (f) A death of a person confined in a public institution other than a hospital, infirmary or nursing home.

Will an examination be performed by the Medical Examiner?

The Medical Examiner will determine to what extent an examination is necessary to determine cause and manner of death. The decedent may be examined externally and/or internally. A decision of whether or not an autopsy is necessary will be made after gathering some initial information concerning 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 and collecting samples for drug testing may be all that is necessary. However, should an autopsy be deemed necessary, the deceased will be transported to Hudson Valley Health Alliance, Broadway Campus, 396 Broadway, Kingston, NY for examination by a Forensic Pathologist. 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.

What is an autopsy?

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 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 arrangements have been made by the next-of-kin. An autopsy does NOT interfere with the final viewing and funeral of the deceased.

Is there a charge for an autopsy/examination?

Autopsies authorized by the Ulster County Medical Examiner are conducted at the County's expense.

Is family consent needed for an examination/autopsy to be performed?

No. Examinations (when deemed necessary by the Medical Examiner) do not require consent from the next-of-kin.

What is meant by next-of-kin?

Next-of-kin refers to the nearest blood and nonblood relative of a person who has died. In Ulster County the next of kin, i.e., those who have sole discretion over the control and/or disposition of the body is prioritized as per the following:

- Person designated in written instrument (e.g. Living Will, Power of Attorney, Executor of Estate)
- Spouse
- Domestic Partner
- Any child 18 or older
- Either parent
- Any brother or sister 18 or older
- Authorized guardian
- Persons 18 or older 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 grand-parents
- Second cousins
- Fiduciary

Close friend or other relative under specific conditions
Public Administrator

What does cause of death mean?

The *cause of death* is the disease or injury responsible for initiating the lethal sequence of events.

What does manner of death mean?

The *manner of death* describes the circumstances surrounding the death. The manner of death is classified into one of the following:

- Natural
- Accident
- Homicide
- Suicide
- Undetermined
- Investigation pending (until cause and manner of death have been determined)

If a death appears natural, why is the Medical Examiner involved?

The Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office has jurisdiction when:

- The death was unexpected and no medical cause of death can be determined
- When the decedent was not under the care of a physician
- When a death might be due to something considered a public health hazard
- When a private doctor will not sign the death certificate

Will organ or tissue donation be possible if a case is accepted by the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office?

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 certain forensic evidence, the Medical Examiner may have to disallow certain aspects of the organ or tissue procurement procedure. The Ulster County Medical Examiner will notify the organ procurement agency where appropriate.

Can there be an open casket after an examination/autopsy?

An examination does not disfigure the decedent in any way that will prevent the family from having an open casket. However, the circumstances surrounding the death must be taken into consideration.

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 happens to the personal property of the deceased?

Personal property is inventoried and given to the funeral director to give to the family member making the arrangements. In some cases, the police will secure the property.

Why is a death certificate necessary?

A death certificate is needed to bury/cremate remains, claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle estates, and pursue any civil or criminal legal actions.

Can death certificates be obtained from the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office?

No, the original death certificate is filed by the funeral director in the Registrar's Office respective to where the decedent passed away. Next of kin and others legally entitled to them may obtain them from the Registrar's Office in the city/village/town where the death occurred or from the funeral director at a cost of \$10 each. More information can be obtained through New York State Vital Statistics at 1-877-854-4481 or http://www.health.state.ny.us/vital_records/.

What does it mean if the death certificate reads pending investigation?

"Pending Investigation" means that the case is incomplete and additional work and investigation is necessary, e.g. waiting for lab results. The decedent can still be released and arrangements made. This will be amended when the investigation is complete and the final cause and manner of death have been determined.

Who may obtain a copy of the autopsy/examination report?

Pursuant to County Law Section 677, records are available to:

- The District Attorney of the County
- The personal representative, spouse, child (over 18 years old), sibling, grandparent;
- Upon proper application of any person who is or may be affected in a civil or criminal action by the contents of the record of any investigation, an order may be made by a court of record, or by a justice of the Supreme Court, that the record of that investigation be made available for his/her inspection, or that a transcript there be furnished to him/her, or both.

How do I obtain a copy of the examination report, and is there a cost?

An examination report may be obtained by next-of-kin (spouse, parent, child, grandparent) at no cost by completing the [Affidavit for Final Autopsy Report Request](#).

All others/non-relations (lawyers, insurance companies, etc.) will need a HIPAA release or judicial court order.

Certified copies are \$75.00, uncertified copies are \$35.00. Checks are payable to the Ulster County Commissioner of Finance

How long does it take to obtain an examination report?

The length of time varies from case to case. After an examination is performed it generally takes up to 90 days for the final report. Complicated cases may take several months.

Can a neighbor call up and find out information about a death?

Information is strictly confidential and not a matter of public record.

Where is the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office located?

The office is located at the Ulster County Department of Health and Mental Health, 239 Golden Hill Lane, Kingston, NY 12401.

Are support groups available to help our family?

This is a difficult time and resources are available in the community. A list of community agencies that offer support can be found:

www.ulsterhelps.org

<https://www.jfsulster.org/> (Jewish Family Services of Ulster County)

<http://www.mhainulster.com/> (Mental Health Association in Ulster)

<https://www.hvhospice.org/> (Hudson Valley Hospice)

<https://www.haileyshopefoundation.org/family-support/additional-resources/perinatal-bereavement-support/> (Empty Cradle Bereavement Support Group)

<http://www.familyofwoodstockinc.org/> (Family of Woodstock)

<http://hvmh.org/> (Hudson Valley Mental Health)

<http://accesssupports.org/behavioral-health/> (Access Supports for Living)

<http://www.ellenvilleregional.org/about-your-hospital/our-community/> (Ellenville Regional Hospital Support Groups)

<http://familyservicesny.org/> (Family Services Inc.)

What needs to be done when a loved one dies?

1. When you are notified of a death, call a friend, family member, and/or clergy member for support.
2. Select a funeral home to assist you with preparations. Check with friends, neighbors, or your local phone book for your selection.
3. Remember, the funeral home will contact the Medical Examiner's Office and take care of the release of the decedent.
4. Start a list and a file with information given to you and the names and phone numbers of the people that you will be talking with.
5. Remember to try and eat something and try to rest. Let your family and friends help you!

Which Funeral Homes are in Ulster County?

<http://www.funeralhomesguide.com/county/ny/ulstercounty.html> (Ulster County Funeral Homes)

The staff at the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office hopes this information will be useful to you. Please contact the Ulster County Medical Examiner's Office at (845)340-3009 Monday through Friday between the hours of 9 am and 5 pm if you have additional concerns that have not been addressed.