



D63 Where Is Your Family Member?: Harris County Medical Examiners Office's Innovative Approach to Locating Next of Kin

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The goal of this presentation is to instruct those attending in the proper methods of locating Next Of Kin (NOK) in an effort to eliminate any NOK discrepancies.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing tools to more effectively locate and notify NOK. The information provided will illustrate the various methods that are critical in conducting accurate NOK searches and demonstrate how each search method is utilized as a part of the thorough investigation of medical-legal cases.

The Harris County Medical Examiner's Office (HCMEO) located in Houston, Texas is the third largest county in the United States and is located on the gulf coastal plain. The county contains the Port of Houston, which is one of the busiest sea ports in the nation, the fourth largest airport system, and the world's largest medical center. Harris County is multicultural and highly diverse with an estimated population of 3.9 million that includes the third largest Hispanic/Mexican American

population in the United States. Approximately 400,000 illegal immigrants reside in the city of Houston alone. The homeless population of an estimated 12-14,000 is exceedingly high in comparison to national data. Due to the large population, diverse community, and significant number of transient residents, it is often difficult and time-consuming to locate NOK. HCMEO has addressed this problem with the formation of the Identification and Tracking Unit and the development of an innovative electronic system that tracks homeless decedents and is used to maintain annual statistics on certain categories of cases. From 2007 through the first six months of 2009, 152 cases of homeless decedents were investigated. From 2004-2006 the average time required to identify a decedent was 23 days. The average time has decreased since 2007 to an average of three days. In 90% of cases NOK are notified of a death within 24 hours of the decedent's arrival to HCMEO.

HCMEO follows the legal order of succession when determining legal NOK as follows: decedent's written directive, legal spouse, common-law spouse, adult children, parents or siblings, and extended family members. This succession is followed to properly identify and locate NOK and to eliminate any NOK discrepancies. When a NOK discrepancy arises, the family is referred to the HCME General Counsel, a Harris County attorney. HCMEO is currently the only medical examiner's office in Texas staffed with an on-site attorney. The attorney reviews written directives and instructs families on how to seek legal counsel via a private attorney if necessary.

HCMEO has established procedures in place to ensure that NOK are notified promptly. Investigators are directed to conduct thorough searches at the scene to obtain any phone numbers, documents or address books containing NOK information. HCMEO accesses public information through the county via birth/death records, marriage licenses, divorce decrees, personal/real property records, various internet searches and criminal history documents. Due to the large influx of immigrants in Harris County, HCMEO consults and seeks assistance from the appropriate consulate on any foreign national. The consulate will verify foreign nationals, locate NOK, and obtain birth records and fingerprints. Public outreach through local, national and international media outlets is accomplished through the Critical Reach program, giving the public an opportunity to assist HCMEO with locating NOK. HCMEO employs three anthropologists who assist with identification of decedents via radiograph comparison. An odontologist provides dental identification consultations when required. Unknown decedent fliers, with photos when appropriate, are distributed through multi-lingual media outlets, consulates, homeless advocacy groups and law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement agencies provide criminal history searches which may include NOK contacts, last known addresses and previous law enforcement encounters. HCMEO works in conjunction with law enforcement agencies by requesting assistance in responding to a last known address to locate NOK and perform death notifications.

Over the years, HCMEO has reached out to the public in a sensitive and respectful manner to locate NOK and confirm decedent identification. In each case HCMEO ensures that the information provided to the public is presented in a sensitive manner out of the respect for the decedents and their families. This innovative process may be modeled at other medical examiner's offices to insure that decedents are properly identified and NOK located expeditiously.

Identification, Scene Investigation, Next of Kin