



D43 County Burial: A Look at the Final Resting Place of Unclaimed and Unidentified Remains

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The goal of this presentation is to identify the process for referring unclaimed and unidentified remains to county burial. The steps will include how the remains are handled, the period prior to the county burial referral and how county burials are handled after family has been located and notified. This presentation will also examine other county and state programs and compare those processes with Harris County. Statistics regarding the number of remains that have been unclaimed and the number of remains that remain unidentified will be included. Statistics on the number of remains where family was located after the referral for county burial was completed will also be provided. Lastly, case studies for a 2007 homeless veteran, two 1973-murder cases that have been identified, and a 1980's death of a Marine will be provided.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by serving as an educational tool for family members of those deceased and can help other jurisdictions augment or implement new procedures for handling unclaimed or unidentified remains. A county burial program will continue the respect and support for those remains that are unclaimed and unidentified. A county burial program will allow time for family members or friends to come forward to pay their respects and claim or acknowledge the deceased and their life.

The state of the economy has created difficulty with locating family members of deceased persons. The unemployment rate is on the rise and job prospects are fewer and farther between. Society has to travel farther and in some instances, move out-of-the-state in order to obtain employment. This makes it more challenging for families to keep up with loved ones and maintain close relationships. This also creates difficulty for HCIFS when trying to locate next-of-kin (NOK).

This presentation will provide information to the attendees regarding the timeline, process, and requirements needed for county burial referrals. The Investigation Division utilizes a checklist of contacts to look for the legal next of kin. After the checklist is exhausted, then the case is referred to the ID Unit for county burial referral. Part of the checklist is various internet searches, like public records, ancestry, and county clerk databases. Information from criminal and civil histories, bankruptcy court records, child support payments, life insurance, property ownership, and licenses can help in locating family. A news router or consulate letter is sent when NOK cannot be located, in the hope of someone reading the article and recognizing the description or picture provided. An abandonment letter is sent to the NOK 15 days after the NOK was notified. Fifteen days after that mailing, county burial will be referred, unless the NOK responds with their choice of a funeral home. Families may apply for county burial assistance through the Harris County Community Services Department Bereavement Services program. The status of the families and the decedent's estate will need to meet financial criteria before assistance will be approved. Upon approval, the referral is usually immediate.

Fetuses and infants have a separate criteria regarding burial. Fetuses and infants must meet live birth or gestation/weight requirements of >500g/22 weeks and have been abandoned. The HC Burial Services will not provide burial assistance for an unclaimed fetus of <20 weeks and/or 500 grams; a surgical specimen disposal form is completed and processed by the morgue as a surgical specimen. HCBS will provide burial assistance for an unclaimed neonate, regardless of age or weight, if neonate took a breath or showed signs of life at birth.

County Burial, Unidentified/Unclaimed Remains, County Burial Program