



## General Section - 2012

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### D76 Assessing the Need for Family Assistance Services within the Medical Examiner System

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be familiar with the current role of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Science as it pertains to family assistance. The challenges of assisting grieving families will be outlined and current limitations of assistance within the Harris County Institute of Forensic Science will be identified. This presentation will assess the need for improved family assistance services.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by contributing to the understanding of challenges in assisting grieving families and identifying the need for a specialized program to assist with family assistance services.

By Texas Law, (CCP Art. 49.25), the medical examiner is mandated to determine the cause and manner of death in all cases of accident, homicide, suicide, and undetermined death. In cases of natural death, when the person is not under a doctor's care, or the person passes away in less than 24 hours after admission to a hospital, the medical examiner must be notified, as an autopsy may be required. The forensic investigators are responsible for conducting death investigations by developing organized, concise, and accurate death reports in accordance with Texas Code of Criminal Procedures 49.25. The investigators are also responsible for handling proper identification of the decedent and notification of family. The medical examiner must use all information available to make a determination about the death. This may include information from his/her own investigation, police reports, staff investigations, and discussion with the family and friends of the decedent.

Medical examiner investigators may be the first official to contact the family of the deceased individual and as such, need to be sensitive and exhibit an understanding of the initial grieving process. The sudden and unexpected death of a family member/friend can bring a range of emotions including guilt, shock, anger, sadness, resentment, and regret, as well as a number of unanswered questions. There is no time frame for grief and no right or wrong way to grieve. It is important to understand that everyone grieves differently. Grief is an individual experience that is unique to each person and to the relationship he or she had with the deceased. The act of informing family members of a death requires a responsible, well-trained, and sensitive individual who can manage to cope with this mutually traumatizing experience. Family members of deceased victims have a wide range of needs and reactions to the sudden and untimely death of their loved ones. Consequently, the individuals who deliver death notifications and the manner in which they carry out this duty factors significantly in the trauma experienced by the family.

The Harris County Institute of Forensic Science currently has limited resources to locate, notify, and support families. There are more than 2,000 violent deaths per year in Harris County. Approximately 85% percent of families are located and notified within 24 hours of death. However, the remaining 15% require in-depth searches to ensure timely identification and notification of death. Families often require ongoing communication to obtain further information and to provide final determination of cause and manner of death. There is no formal means for the Harris County Institute of Forensic Science to assist families in identifying local victim related services and resources.

A specialized family assistance program is necessary in the medical examiner's system. The program would ensure timely notification of death, compassionate assistance in understanding the medicolegal death investigation process, and early access to local relevant victim family related services. The program would assist in the collaboration and coordination of local governmental and not-for-profit victim assistance service providers to meet the emotional, physical, mental, and financial needs of those affected by untimely violent death.

#### **Medical Examiner, Grief, Family Assistance**