Standard Guide for Postmortem Facial Image Capture

WHAT IS AN AAFS STANDARD FACTSHEET?

The AAFS produces clear, concise, and easy to understand factsheets to summarize the contents of technical and professional forensic science standards on the OSAC Registry. They are not intended to provide an interpretation for any portion of a published standard.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STANDARD?

The purpose of this standard guide is to provide guidelines for capturing postmortem facial images of human decedents in controlled (e.g., morgue) and semi-controlled (e.g., field) settings to facilitate automated facial recognition (FR) searches or manual facial comparisons that could contribute to identification efforts.

This guide provides an overview of the optimal processes and techniques for the capture of postmortem facial images of human remains to maximize their utility in automated FR searches and manual facial image comparisons.

Agency policies to preserve forensic evidence collection, documentation, or chain of custody are not superseded by this guide. Any alterations of the body position or condition should also be documented.

WHY IS THIS STANDARD IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

Most medical examiner or coroner offices have protocols in place for photographing the faces of decedents who require postmortem examinations. These protocols may not yield images that meet the criteria necessary to be suitable for utilizing an automated facial recognition system as part of the identification process for unknown decedents.

Many law enforcement agencies have access to FR technologies, and are able to assist efforts to identify unknown decedents when they are provided with appropriate images for submitting into automated FR systems. This standard provides guidance for capturing FR appropriate facial images to aid in the identification of unknown decedents.

HOW IS THIS STANDARD USED AND WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

This standard is used to ensure that postmortem facial images captured of unknown decedents in a controlled setting have the maximum potential to result in successful generation of investigative leads when submitted into an automated facial recognition system.

The key elements in this standard focus on head position relative to the camera, recommendations for the capture environment, and minimizing the appearance of obstructing matter.

Head Position
The optimal position of the body for facial image capture would involve having the head in a vertical position with the mouth closed. The eyes should be parallel, and the subject should be directly facing the camera.

Capture Environment
Lighting should be uniform without harsh shadows or reflections. The head should appear vertically oriented, with the plane of the face as parallel as possible to the plane of the camera lens. The camera-to-subject distance should be far enough to avoid causing distortion of the facial features (ideally four to eight feet).

Obstructions
All obstructions (e.g., medical interventions, hair, debris) should be removed prior to photographing the face. Efforts should be made to open the eyes (to make the pupils visible) and close the mouth.