

## Ethics for Coroners and Medical Examiners

### Purpose

Public confidence in the integrity of county and state government demands that public officials demonstrate the highest ethical standards at all times. The coroner or medical examiner must address the forensic needs of the state while maintaining the respect, dignity, and rights of individuals.

### Code of Ethics

1. It is preferable that a notification of death not occur over the telephone unless the next-of-kin is more than an hour of driving time away.<sup>1</sup>
2. The coroner or medical examiner shall work as quickly as possible to release a decedent to the next-of-kin, or its selected funeral home, for the purpose of mourning and burial. In 42 states and the District of Columbia families may care for their own dead and may legally take possession of the body.<sup>2</sup>
3. In 34 states, a person may name an agent for body disposition, superceding the rights of next-of-kin, so it will be important to determine if the decedent has appointed such a person.  
[[www.funerals.org/your-legal-rights/funeral-decision-rights](http://www.funerals.org/your-legal-rights/funeral-decision-rights)]
4. The ethical coroner or medical examiner's office will have a printed list in alphabetical order of all area funeral homes to give to a local family or agent. The heading on the list should remind them they have the right to pick a funeral home of their own choosing. Contact information for each listing is to be included. It would be unethical for a public official to recommend a funeral home or take advantage of one's position as a funeral director serving as a coroner or deputy. Funeral director coroners shall not exert pressure on the next-of-kin or designated agent to retain their business, nor shall they demand payment for their removal or transport services in exchange for releasing the decedent.
5. A family from outside the death area should be encouraged to contact a hometown funeral home rather than a local one, as the hometown funeral home is in the best position to serve the needs of the family in coordinating return of the deceased with other funeral preparations. If an immediate cremation will be planned, sometimes the hometown funeral director can get the best prices.
6. Anyone serving as a transport agent for a coroner or medical examiner shall cover any signage that would identify a funeral home on the vehicle used or on any other equipment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Death Notification* by R. Moroni Leash, LCSW, MSHCA, Upper Access Books, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> States that require a funeral director to file the death certificate and oversee disposition: CT, IL, IN, LA, MI, NE, NJ, and NY.

7. While a sensitive coroner or medical examiner will forewarn next-of-kin or designated agents if the body's appearance may be shocking, those individuals retain the right to see a deceased regardless of how traumatic the cause of death might have been.

8. When there are religious objections to autopsy, the requirements of the state shall be imposed only to the extent that is absolutely necessary. If any organs are removed during autopsy, the family/agent is to be notified of such and the purpose for removal.

9. Embalming will interfere with certain forensic processes as well as incurring a cost for which reimbursement is usually desired. It is also a procedure that is offensive to certain religious and personal values. Therefore, no coroner or medical examiner will authorize embalming before all investigative procedures have been accomplished or without the express permission of the next-of-kin or other legally responsible agent. Refrigeration is an acceptable and reliable alternative for body preservation.

10. All personal possessions of the deceased shall be accurately reported including cash, jewelry, and any other items. Safe-keeping shall be provided until claimed by the proper person.