



**ERIE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
OFFICE OF THE MEDICAL EXAMINER**

MISSION:

To provide regionalized death investigation services to Western New York Counties to determine the cause and manner of a person's demise.

**INFORMATION FOR
FAMILIES**

This pamphlet had been compiled by the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office to offer some helpful insights and suggestions for the families we serve.

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http://www.erie.gov/health/services/medical_examiner.asp

What is a Medical Examiner's Office and what do they do?

A Medical Examiner's Office is a medicolegal office charged by state laws to investigate certain types of human death. Forensic pathologists, physicians with specialty training review records, conduct investigations and perform autopsies to determine the cause and manner of death in these cases.

Which deaths must be examined and investigated?

The medical examiner is required by New York State County Law section 673 to examine and investigate deaths that

- appear to be violent – e.g. motor vehicle accident, industrial accident, fall, homicide, etc.
- are caused by an unlawful act or criminal neglect
- are suspicious or unexplained
- are suspected to be caused by a criminal abortion
- are unattended by a physician or no physician is able to certify the cause of death
- are of a person confined in a public institution other than a hospital, infirmary or nursing home

What does “cause of death” mean?

The *cause of death* is the disease or injury that caused the physical death.

What does “manner of death” mean?

The *manner of death* describes the circumstances surrounding the death. The manners of death are classified into one of the following:

- Natural
- Accident
- Homicide
- Suicide
- Undetermined
- Investigation Pending (in certain situations), this then needs to be changed to one of the above categories.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical examination of the body after death. The body is examined externally and internally to discover the cause and manner of death. Specimens of organs and body fluids may be taken to make a medical diagnosis. This diagnosis may take weeks to finalize. Each body is treated with the utmost dignity and respect at all times. Autopsies are usually performed Monday through Saturday.

Is family consent needed for an autopsy to be performed?

No. Autopsies performed at the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office are required by New York State law and do not require consent from next-of-kin.

If a death appears natural, why is the Medical Examiner involved?

The Medical Examiner has jurisdiction when: the death was unexpected and no medical cause of death can be determined; when the decedent was not under the care of a physician; when a death might be due to something considered a public health hazard; or when a private doctor will not sign the death certificate.

Will the family be charged for an autopsy?

Autopsies are performed at no cost to the family.

Will organ or tissue donation be possible if a case is accepted by the Medical Examiner's Office?

The Medical Examiner's Office supports efforts to promote organ and tissue donation.

Can there be an open casket after an autopsy?

An autopsy *does not* disfigure the body in any way that will prevent the family from having an open casket; however the circumstances surrounding the death must be taken into consideration.

After the autopsy, how are arrangements made for the release of the body?

The funeral director, chosen by the family, will contact the Medical Examiner's Office and make all the necessary arrangements for the release of the body and transport to the funeral home. The body will be released after the examination is complete.

What happens to personal property of the Deceased?

Personal property is inventoried and given to the funeral director to give to the family member making the arrangements. In some cases, the police will secure the property.

Why is a death certificate necessary?

A death certificate is needed to bury/cremate remains, claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle estates and pursue any civil or criminal legal actions.

Can death certificates be obtained from the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office?

No, the original death certificate is filed by the funeral director in the Registrars Office respective to where they passed away. Next of kin and others legally entitled to them may obtain them from the Registrar's Office in the city/village/town where the death occurred or from the funeral director at a cost of \$10 each. More information can be obtained through New York State Vital Statistics at **1-877-854-4481** or http://www.health.state.ny.us/vital_records/.

What does it mean if the death certificate reads “Pending Investigation?”

“Pending Investigation” means that the case is incomplete and additional work and investigation is necessary. The body can still be released and arrangements made. This will be amended when the investigation is complete and the final cause and manner of death have been determined.

Who may obtain a copy of the autopsy report?

Pursuant to county law section 677, autopsy records are open to:

- The District Attorney of the County
- The personal representative, spouse or next-of-kin, or child over 18 years of age
- Upon proper application of any person who is or may be affected in a civil or criminal action by the contents of the record of any investigation, an order may be made by a court of record, or by a justice of the Supreme Court, that the record of that investigation be made available for his/her inspection, or that a transcript there be furnished to him/her, or both.
- Upon proper application of any person having a substantial interest therein, an order may be made by a court of record, or by a justice of the Supreme Court, that the record of that investigation be made available for his/her inspection, or that a transcript there be furnished to him/her, or both.

How is an autopsy report requested and how much does one cost?

An autopsy report can be obtained by the family at no cost by writing the **Erie County Medical Examiner’s Office at 501 Kensington Ave, Buffalo, NY 14214**. All requests must include:

- Name, address and phone number
- The name of the deceased and the date of death
- The relationship to the deceased
- The signature of requesting party
- It may need to be notarized

Or you may use the form found on the last page of this packet

All others/non-relations (lawyers, insurance companies, etc.) will be charged a \$38.50 fee effective January 1, 2009.

How long does it take to obtain an autopsy report?

The length of time varies from case to case. After an autopsy is performed and laboratory tests are required, it generally takes up to 120 days for the final report. Complicated cases may take several months.

Who can be called with questions about the autopsy report?

All autopsy reports have a condolence letter attached which contains the office phone number and hours to call. The forensic pathologist who performed the autopsy will answer the family’s questions to the best of his/her ability. The office has a Family Room and the family can set up an appointment for this purpose or questions can be answered over the phone.

Can a neighbor call up and find out information about a death?

Information is strictly confidential and not a matter of public record.

Where is the Medical Examiner's Office located?

The office is located at **501 Kensington Ave, Buffalo**, on the campus of the Erie County Medical Center. If driving, enter through Gate 1 off of Grider Street. Follow this road through the first stop sign. At the second stop sign, take a left. Follow this road for about 0.1 miles to a stop sign. You will see large white oxygen tanks on your left hand side. The driveway for the Erie Medical Examiner's Office is on the left immediately after the stop sign and before the tanks. Take this left.

Are support groups available to help our family through this?

This is a difficult time and resources are available in the community. A list of community agencies that offer support is attached or you may go online to:

http://www.erie.gov/depts/seniorservices/caregiving/caregiver_groups.asp.

There are many decisions to be made and people are available to assist you.

When a loved one dies what needs to be done?

1. When you are notified of a death, call a friend, family member and/or clergy member for support.
2. Select a funeral home to assist you with preparations. Check with friends, neighbors or your local phone book for your selection.
3. Remember, the funeral home will contact the Medical Examiner's office and take care of the release of the body
4. Start a list and a file with information given to you and the names and phone numbers of the people you will be talking with.
5. Remember to try to eat something and try to rest. Let your family and friends help you!

What if a family objects to an autopsy?

By law, families cannot object to an autopsy that is deemed necessary by the Medical Examiner. As a courtesy to family, they will be given a 48 hour window in which to obtain a court order to stop an autopsy; however the objection must be submitted in writing to the Medical Examiner's Office (fax 961-7581). In certain cases, a partial/limited autopsy may be performed at the discretion of the Medical Examiner.

The staff at the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office hopes this information will be useful to you. Please contact the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office at (716) 961-7591 if you have additional concerns that have not been addressed.

Our deepest condolences on your loss.

Dianne R. Vertes, PhD MD
Chief Medical Examiner for Erie County

Proper Disposal of Prescription Drugs

Office of National Drug Control Policy February 2007

Federal Guidelines:

Take unused, unneeded, or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers and throw them in the trash.

Mixing prescription drugs with an undesirable substance, such as used coffee grounds or kitty litter, and putting them in impermeable, non-descript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags will further ensure the drugs are not diverted.

Flush prescription drugs down the toilet *only* if the label or accompanying patient information specifically instructs doing so (see box).

Take advantage of community pharmaceutical take-back programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Some communities have pharmaceutical take-back programs or community solid-waste programs that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for proper disposal. Where these exist, they are a good way to dispose of unused pharmaceuticals.

The FDA advises that the following drugs be flushed down the toilet instead of thrown in the trash: **Actiq** (fentanyl citrate), **Daytrana Transdermal Patch** (methylphenidate), **Duragesic Transdermal System** (fentanyl), **OxyContin Tablets** (oxycodone), **Avinza Capsules** (morphine sulfate), **Baraclude Tablets** (entecavir), **Reyataz Capsules** (atazanavir sulfate), **Tequin Tablets** (gatifloxacin), **Zerit for Oral Solution** (stavudine), **Meperidine HCl Tablets**, **Percocet** (Oxycodone and Acetaminophen), **Xyrem** (Sodium Oxybate), **Fentora** (fentanyl buccal tablet)

Note: Patients should always refer to printed material accompanying their medication for specific instructions.

Office of National Drug Control Policy ONDCP, Washington, D.C. 20503p (202) 395-6618 f (202) 395-6730
www.WhiteHouseDrugPolicy.gov

TRAUMA SCENE WASTE MANAGEMENT

UPDATED 1/31/12

Action Bio-Care

24 Hour 1-877-493-4605

www.actionbiocare.com

Advanced Bio-Treatment

Professional Trauma Scene Cleaning

24 Hour Emergency Dispatch

3 Hour response time

Mailing Center

213 Foothills Dr.

Murrayville, GA 30564

24 Hour 1-800-860-4268

www.advancedbio-treatment.com

Aftermath, Inc.

24 Hour Emergency Dispatch

1-800-366-9923

www.aftermathinc.com

Crime Scene Clean-Up

24 Hour Hotline

1-800-295-5460

www.crimeclean-up.com

Crime & Trauma Scene Eraser

131 Burke Dr.

Cheektowaga, NY 14215

24 Hour (716) 835-1393, 361-2824

www.erase-it.org

steven_mcilwain@yahoo.com

Enviro-Care, Inc.

Disaster Restoration Services

14 Roberts Avenue

Buffalo, NY 14206

(716) 826-6970

Fax (716) 826-6975

1-800-875-6970

Kleen Scene

Crime and Death Scene Recovery

Biohazardous Cleaning Services

52 Miriam Ave.

Blasdell, NY 14219

24 Hour (716) 440-8071

www.kleenscene.com

info@kleenscene.com

On the Scene

Bio-Recovery Services of WNY

24 Hour Discreet Response

716-796-8329

Hamburg, NY

SERVPRO:

Biohazard and Fire & Water – Cleanup
& Restoration

Servpro.com

Post Office Box 42

North Tonawanda, NY 14120-0042

24 Hour (716) 694-SPRO (7776)

Spotless Touch Crime Scene Cleaners

Crime, Unattended & Death Clean-up

P.O. Box 425

Buffalo, NY 14207

(716) 563-2051

24 Hour Emergency Dispatch

www.cscleaners.com

info@cscleaners.com

Stratus Building Solutions

1780 Wehrle Drive, Suite 102

Williamsville, New York 14221

716-810-0200

www.stratusclean.com

Grief Support Services

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Phone</u>	<u>Address</u>
Grief Support Groups (Life Transition Ctr.)	836-6460	150 Bennett Rd. Cheektowaga NY 14215
Grief Support Group	636-3050	370 John James Audubon Pkwy
Grief/Loss Widow/Widower Support Group	883-1914	
Widow's Support Group "The Willows"	646-0665	Hamburg Senior Ctr. 4150 Sowles Rd
MADD Erie County Chapter	662-0642	3959 N. Buffalo Rd Orchard Park, NY 14127
Erie County Network Inc.	834-2531	2969 Main St. Buffalo, NY
Jewish Family Service of Buffalo and Erie County	883-1914	70 Barker St. Buffalo, NY
WNY State Center for Sudden Infant Death (SIDS) and Infant Mortality	822-0919	Joan A. Male Family Support Center 60 Dingens Street Buffalo, NY 14206
SIDS Alliance of WNY	837-5189	3580 Harlem Rd. Buffalo, NY
Mental Health Assoc. of EC	886-1242	999 Delaware Ave Buffalo, NY 14209
Crisis Services	834-3131	2969 Main Street Buffalo, NY 14214
Alcohol and Drug Dependency Services	821-0391	920 Harlem Rd. West Seneca, NY 14224

UPDATED 9-2011



COUNTY OF ERIE

AUTOPSY REPORT REQUEST

MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE
501 KENSINGTON AVE.
BUFFALO, NEW YORK 14214
Phone 716-961-7591

Autopsy reports may be requested by immediate next-of-kin. All requests must be notarized and mailed to the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office at the above address. Faxed, e-mailed or copied requests will not be accepted. Autopsy reports will be mailed to the address provided below.

Date: _____

I, _____, am requesting a copy of the
Print Name

Autopsy Report from the Erie County Medical Examiner's Office for

_____ who passed away on _____
Deceased's Name Date

My relationship to the deceased is: _____

Signature

Report to be mailed to: _____
Address

City, State, Zip

Phone #

Notary use only below this line

STATE OF _____

COUNTY OF _____

Sworn to me on this _____ day of _____, in the year 20 _____

Notary Public Printed Name: _____

My Commission Expires: _____