



# COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF MEDICAL EXAMINER



1104 NORTH MISSION ROAD, LOS ANGELES, CA 90033  
(323) 343-0512: M-F, 8 a.m. - 5 p.m., except County holidays  
(323) 343-0714: 24/7

[me.lacounty.gov](http://me.lacounty.gov)

[info@me.lacounty.gov](mailto:info@me.lacounty.gov)

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*We offer our most sincere condolences to you and your family for the loss of your loved one. We hope this information will help assist you through your grief and answer questions about the body examination process and the role of the Medical Examiner.*

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## **Role of the Department of Medical Examiner:**

The Department of Medical Examiner is an independent entity, separate from any law enforcement agency. We review deaths that occur within Los Angeles County that are sudden, unexpected, or violent, or when the deceased has not been seen recently by a physician (California Government Code Section 27491). Through forensic investigation and scientific means, we offer unbiased determinations of cause and manner of death.

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## **Identifying Your Loved One:**

Visual identifications are conducted at the location of the death through comparison of an identification card by the investigator. In some cases, positive identification may require additional forensic processes like fingerprint, dental or x-ray comparison, medical implants or devices, DNA, or anthropology. **We do not offer viewing services. Please contact your funeral director for viewing options at the funeral home.**

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## **Body Examination:**

The deputy medical examiner performs the body examination and reviews the circumstances and medical history to determine the cause and manner of death. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs may be examined, and samples of body fluids may be retained and tested for drugs and other substances. Occasionally, larger portions of tissues, or even whole organs, may be retained for additional or specialized examination, if required. In some cases, an internal examination is not necessary to determine the cause and manner of death.

**It may take several weeks, or longer, for the cause of death to be determined based on the information gathered during a forensic death investigation and if specialized laboratory studies are required.** These delays should not prevent the release of the body to the legal next of kin to allow for final disposition. In addition to assisting in determining cause of death, these results can be important in civil or criminal court cases.

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## **Postmortem Toxicology Testing:**

Postmortem toxicology testing is a multistep and often complicated process, not a one-instrument test as seen in the clinical setting. Postmortem samples require extraction steps to prepare a sample to be tested on an instrument. Each class of drugs may require the use of multiple instruments to test the sample. The more drugs found in a decedent's system, the longer the testing takes. This is the typical process for all forensic postmortem toxicology testing. **The goal of the Department is to complete testing within 90 days.** It should be noted, not all cases will require toxicology testing. The need for testing is determined by the deputy medical examiner.

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## **Religious Objection to an Autopsy:**

Deputy medical examiners determine the need for an autopsy. Please contact the investigator right away if you feel an autopsy would be contrary to the decedent's religious beliefs and object to an autopsy. We will work with you to try and accommodate your wishes, as long as we can fulfill our legal obligations (California Government Code Section 27491.3).

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## **Decedent Property:**

The legal next of kin can claim most of a decedent's personal possessions in our custody. The legal next of kin is the nearest relative of the decedent - if married, the spouse or domestic partner; if no spouse, then adult children, or surviving parents, or nearest blood relative, according to California State Law, unless otherwise specified in a legal document, such as a will. Government documents, like driver's licenses and passports, must be returned to the issuing agency for disposition to prevent identity theft. To pick up decedent's

property, please visit the Department of Medical Examiner at 1104 N. Mission Rd., Los Angeles, Monday through Friday, except County holidays, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information, please call the Property Section at (323) 343-0515.

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### **Final Reports:**

The final reports are the documents explaining why a person died. Please know the determination of the cause and manner of death can take days to several months depending on the circumstances surrounding the death. **We do not automatically contact the legal next of kin to provide the results of our investigation because we recognize that you may not wish to discuss the cause of death.** If you would like to discuss the results, please call us at (323) 343-0520 to schedule an appointment with a deputy medical examiner to discuss the determination.

Please purchase a copy of the final report online at [me.lacounty.gov](http://me.lacounty.gov) or call our Records Section at (323) 343-0695.

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### **Death Certificates:**

**We do not issue death certificates.**

Certified copies can be obtained from Vital Records:

- Department of Public Health: (213) 288-7816
- Registrar-Recorder: (800) 201-8999

Sometimes, the issuance of a final death certificate may be delayed, or “deferred,” pending further investigation, such as a review of medical records, a police report, or awaiting additional forensic testing. Funeral arrangements do not need to be delayed, and the decedent can be buried or cremated after an examination, even if the cause and manner of death are pending. The funeral director can guide you with arrangements and questions about the death certificate.

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### **Veterans:**

Persons who served in the Armed Forces, were honorably discharged, and meet other service requirements may be entitled to a veteran’s burial. For information, please contact the County of Los Angeles Military and Veteran’s Affairs Office at (213) 765-9681. For more details on veterans or Social Security benefits, please contact your funeral director.

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### **Data Privacy and Release of Information:**

In California, a decedent’s cause and manner of death, as well as the examination report, are considered public record (California Government Code Section 7920) and can be obtained by media outlets and the public. Public records ultimately allow for transparency in holding government and other agencies accountable and help priority setting for communities. Please know that photos and next of kin contact information are not included in the report.

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### **County Disposition (Cremation):**

When appropriate, the Department of Medical Examiner will refer qualified decedents to the County Disposition program, and the cremated remains will be sent to the Office of Decedent Affairs (ODA), operated by the LA County Department of Health Services. If your loved one was sent for County Disposition, please contact the ODA at (323) 409-7161 to schedule an appointment for pickup.

***A list of low-cost, private mortuaries in Los Angeles County can be provided by the Office of Decedent Affairs to assist families in need.***

