

# **PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED FOR HANDLING THE DEAD**

## **Overview**

The Department of Coroner is responsible for the collection, identification, and disposition of decedents during conditions of disaster or extreme peril. Responsibilities include the following:

1. Identify human remains and provide adequate and decent storage.
2. Determine the cause and manner of death.
3. Inventory and protect personal effects found on the decedent.
4. Locate and notify the next-of-kin.
5. Release of remains.
6. Files and records death certificates.

Additional responsibilities include:

1. Coordinate with all agencies both public and private for the collection, identification, notification and disposition of human remains and their personal property.
2. Recruit additional, qualified personnel to perform those various duties.
3. Establishes collection points and body staging areas for processing the dead.

## **Assumptions**

It is likely that fatalities will occur during a major disaster. Communications and transportation may be disrupted. The Department of Coroner may not be able to provide assistance for 72 hours or longer. Therefore, the City must take action to ensure the safe handling and storage of decedents until the Coroner or Coroner-designated personnel can respond.

In the event of a major disaster within Los Angeles County, it may be several days before the dead can be collected and processed by the Department of the Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner.

Therefore, the following guidelines have been prepared to aid the City in handling the dead until the Coroner can relieve the City of that responsibility

## **Handling the Dead**

When it becomes necessary to remove the dead from disaster sites because rescue work is in progress or the health and safety of the community is threatened, specific procedures **must** be followed:

## **Procedures**

- I. Handling of decedents who have been located.

1. Determine if the decedent(s) can be safely moved.
  - a. Structural damage and debris may prevent the safe removal of one or more decedents. If this is the case, clearly mark area for later removal of decedent by the Coroner Team and support personnel. Use an indelible marker or spray paint. Write letters DOA and arrow pointing to the location of the decedent.
  - b. If decedent or body parts can be removed, refer to body-wrapping procedures before removing to fatality collection area.
2. Set aside an area that can be used as a collection point for fatalities. This can be termed the building mortuary. Cement parking structures, covered areas, nearby parks, etc. are ideal for this purpose. Special care should be taken not to place bodies where following supplies are recommended to be kept on hand for the number of possible fatalities: body bags, heavy duty gloves, rubber gloves, plastic aprons, face masks, household Clorox, indelible markers.
3. When handling decedents, follow precautions for infection control. Wear rubber or heavy duty leather gloves, facemask, and protective clothing. Always wash hands with antiseptic solution after handling decedents.
  - a. If a body can be moved, perform the following:
    - (1) **Do not** remove any personal effects from the body at any time. Personal effects must remain with the body **at all times**.
    - (2) Secure body in plastic or vinyl body bag. If a body bag is not available, wrap and secure body with plastic sheet approximately .25mm in thickness. Place body in center of sheet cut 4 ft. X 10 ft. or use two heavy duty lawn debris trash bags. Secure in such a manner that fluids are contained using tie wrap or 3 ply cotton rope. Do not damage body when securing (For example, do not secure rope around the face. This may disfigure the body and hinder identification efforts.).
    - (3) Complete Body Identification Sheet (See Attached).
      - a. Attach a tag or label to the body with the following information (see attached sample):
      - b. Record identity, if known, e.g. through personal recognition, and important details on the discovery of the body (i.e. address, location, position).
      - c. Date and time found.
      - d. Exact location where found, including floor/room number, etc.
      - e. Name/address of decedent, if known.
      - f. If identified, how, when and by whom.
      - g. Name/phone number of person filling out tag.
      - e. If body is contaminated, so state with type of contamination.
      - f. Other casualties (living and dead) found nearby.

- (4) Place each body in a separate disaster pouch or in plastic sheeting and tie securely to prevent unwrapping. Securely attach a second tag with the same information stated in Item No. 2 to the outside of the sheeting or pouch.
- (5) If personal effects are found and thought to belong to a body, place them in a separate container and labeled as in Item No. 2. **Do not** assume any loose effects belong to a body and do not attach loose effects to the body but, store separately.
- (6) Move the properly tagged body with its personal effects to a convenient location, i.e., garage or other cool building, preferably one with refrigeration. In case of extreme heat or direct sunlight, move the body **as soon as possible**.
- (7) Move bagged body to fatality collection area. Establish security to prevent looting of bodies. Keep log sheet for number of bodies stored and a grid showing the location of each body.

II. The putrefaction process is strongly temperature-dependent and also dependent on exposure.

A. Temperature (the season of the year) makes a big difference in the speed of putrefaction of exposed human bodies in Los Angeles County. The following approximations are dependent on the temperatures prevailing at the time:

	Summer	Winter
<b>Facially identifiable</b>	day 1	day 5
<b>Bloating</b>	day 2	day 2 - 6
<b>Putrefaction/external maggots</b>	day 3	day 3 - 10
<b>Collapse of face and abdomen/internal maggots</b>	day 4 - 8	week 2 - 3
<b>Skeletonizing</b>	week 2	week 3+
<b>Dismemberment</b>	week 3+	week 6+

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT THE LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CORONER/DISASTER AND COMMUNITY SERVICES PROGRAM AT (213) 343-0634.**

## BODY IDENTIFICATION SHEET

A. Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Method of Identification:                      Visual Recognition \_\_\_\_\_  
ID found on Body \_\_\_\_\_

DOE (Unidentified):

WHERE: Found at (room number, floor, street, nearest intersection, etc.):

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

TIME: Found at \_\_\_\_\_ AM/PM.

There were no signs of life (e.g., obvious signs of decomposition, no movement, no heart beat, does not react to pain). The decedent was declared dead by the person signing this document.

B. The following valuables and personal effects were found with the body and listed as follows:

Clothing \_\_\_\_\_ Wristwatch \_\_\_\_\_ Jewelry \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

These items have been wrapped with the body.

I (print name) \_\_\_\_\_ hereby attest to the information cited above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of party completing document)                      Date \_\_\_\_\_

Driver's Lic.: \_\_\_\_\_ or SSN \_\_\_\_\_ or

Cal ID

Address: \_\_\_\_\_