

### Case Information:

Investigator/Assistant: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Case Number: ML \_\_\_ - \_\_\_ - \_\_\_

The above case number is helpful when calling the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences.

### Additional Notes:

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

### Available Resources:

If you are in emotional distress and need to talk with someone, call:

**Crisis Hotline:**  
**(713) 970-7000**

#### **FUNERAL/BURIAL ASSISTANCE:**

Harris County Community Services Department  
**(832) 927-4959 | [www.csd.hctx.net](http://www.csd.hctx.net)**

United States Department of Veterans Affairs  
**1 (800) 698-2411 | [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)**

#### **CRIME VICTIM RESOURCES:**

Attorney General of Texas –  
Crime Victim Services

**1 (800) 983-9933 | [www.oag.state.tx.us](http://www.oag.state.tx.us)**

Harris County District Attorney –  
Victims' Services Division  
**(713) 274-0250 | <http://app.dao.hctx.net>**

Harris County Sheriff's Office –  
Victims Assistance Unit  
**(713) 274-9369 | [www.harriscountytso.org](http://www.harriscountytso.org)**

Houston Police Department –  
Victim Services Unit  
**(713) 308-0080 | [www.houstonpolice.org](http://www.houstonpolice.org)**

### Contact Information for Families:

For questions or for community resource information, contact:

**Victim's Assistance**  
**(832) 927-5007**

For medical questions specific to your loved one's case, contact:

**Family Liaison Team**  
**(832) 927-5006\***

To obtain a copy of an autopsy report or for general questions, contact:

**Administrative Services**  
**(832) 927-5004\***

**Main phone number: (832) 927-5000**

To check the status of a case on-line using a name or a case number, visit:

**[www.IFSCaseStatus.com](http://www.IFSCaseStatus.com)**

*\*Phone calls are answered during regular business hours between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday with the exception of Harris County holidays.*



HARRIS COUNTY

**INSTITUTE** SCIENCE.  
SERVICE.  
OF FORENSIC SCIENCES INTEGRITY.

*The mission of the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences is to provide medical examiner and crime laboratory services of the highest quality in an unbiased manner with uncompromised integrity.*

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## FAMILY INFORMATION

Answers to frequently asked questions and helpful phone numbers to assist families following the death of a loved one.



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A Member Institution of the Texas Medical Center

1861 Old Spanish Trail  
Houston, Texas 77054

**(832) 927-5000**

**[ifs.harriscountytexas.gov](http://ifs.harriscountytexas.gov)**

*The Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences is the medical examiner's office for Harris County. The Institute is required by Texas law (Article 49.25 of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure) to determine the cause and manner of death for individuals who die suddenly, unexpectedly, under suspicious circumstances, from drug or chemical toxicity, or any type of injury.*

## Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

### Where is my loved one being taken?

Your loved one is being taken to the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, located in the Texas Medical Center.

### What happens next?

The legal next-of-kin must be identified.

### Who is the legal next-of-kin?

The Institute follows the governance of the Texas Health & Safety Code Section 711.002 to determine the legal next-of-kin for the purposes of disposition of remains. That law outlines the following persons in order of succession:

1. A person designated in a written instrument signed by the decedent;
2. The decedent's surviving spouse or common law spouse;
3. Any one of the decedent's surviving adult children;
4. Either one of the decedent's surviving parents;
5. Any one of the decedent's surviving adult siblings; or
6. Any adult person in the next degree of kinship in the order named by law to inherit the estate of the decedent.

### What should the legal next-of-kin do now?

The legal next-of-kin must choose a funeral home and notify the funeral director that the death is being handled by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences. Your funeral director will help you obtain any personal property found on your loved one and obtain a death certificate.

### Do you have my loved one's personal property?

The Institute collects only the personal property found on the individual's person at the time of their death. Personal property not required for examination as part of a law enforcement investigation will be released to the funeral home selected by the family. The funeral director will return that property to you.

### Can I come to the Institute to view or identify the body?

The funeral home is the setting to view your loved one's remains and all viewing of the body should be arranged through your selected funeral director. We do not arrange viewings at the Institute. In general, identifications are made by circumstantial evidence, and may be confirmed by scientific methods, such as fingerprinting and through comparison of radiographs (x-rays, MRIs, CT scans).

### When will my loved one be released to my chosen funeral home?

In most cases, a body may be examined and available for release to your selected funeral home within 24 hours of arrival to the Institute. However, some cases require more time. Family members may check on the status of their loved one's case through the Institute's online case status page, [www.IFSCaseStatus.com](http://www.IFSCaseStatus.com), or by calling Administrative Services at (832) 927-5004.

### What type of examination is being performed for my loved one?

Each case is unique and is evaluated on an individual basis. Two types of examinations are performed at the Institute by a medical doctor who specializes in Forensic Pathology: external examinations and complete autopsies. External examinations are performed to confirm outward physical signs of disease and to verify the absence or existence of injury. Complete autopsies include an external examination as well as an internal examination. The internal examination is performed to determine or confirm internal physical injury or illness, effects of disease, or in some instances, to collect evidence.

### Will I have to pay for the autopsy or external examination?

There is no charge to a family for an examination performed by the Institute for a death that is within the jurisdiction of the Harris County medical examiner.

### How long will it take to determine the cause and manner of death?

The time required to investigate and to determine the cause and manner of death varies depending on what testing, specialized medical consultation, or additional investigation is required. Some cases can be classified at the time of autopsy, some in a few weeks, but other cases may take several months.

### How can I receive death benefits if my loved one's cause and manner of death is pending?

Issuing a death certificate (pending or otherwise) is the responsibility of the person in charge of interment, usually the family's chosen funeral home. The law requires that the death certificate be filed "not later than the 10<sup>th</sup> day after the date of death" (Texas Health and Safety Code Sections 193.002-193.003).

"Pending" is a temporary classification of the cause and manner of death that is assigned by the medical examiner when further information or testing is required to classify the cause and manner of death. Once the cause and manner of death are determined, the medical examiner's office will file an amendment to the pending death certificate with the state registrar. The family can then order a certified copy of the amended death certificate through their selected funeral home or directly from the Texas Department of State Health Services Vital Statistics Unit.

However, in the meantime, as the investigation is progressing, a "pending" death certificate will be available. The "pending" death certificate is still legal proof of death. Some insurance companies and financial institutions may accept a pending death certificate for the purposes of paying benefits or handling other accounts, but this varies based on each family's specific institution, account(s) or circumstance(s).

### How can I obtain a death certificate?

You may obtain a death certificate through your selected funeral home or from the local registrar designated to the area where the death occurred. The Institute does not issue death certificates. The Institute is responsible for completing only the medical portion of the death certificate, while the funeral home is responsible for completing the demographic portion and filing the completed certificate with the Texas Department of State Health Services.