

CHIEF CORONER COMMUNIQUE

Approach to Managing Natural Death Surge in the Community during Outbreak

Background:

The Office of the Chief Coroner/Ontario Forensic Pathology Service (OCC/OFPS) recognized that a surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths in Ontario would mean an unprecedented pressure on government systems involving case management and deaths. These systems include: health care, long-term care (LTC)/residential; first responders; death investigation; and funeral services sector (FSS).

The OCC/OFPS worked closely with the Bereavement Authority of Ontario (BAO) to develop an approach to minimize the pressure on these systems while adhering to basic principles for managing deaths occurring both in health and long-term care facilities (LTC) and the community. There are five key principles at the core of this approach:

1. Maintain existing processes
 - Reduce burden on the above systems
2. Health and safety of people at all stages of investigation
 - Transfer of deceased to the FSS promptly to avoid possible overflow within hospitals that can increase health and safety risks
 - Prudent use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
3. Limit movement/transfer of deceased persons to minimize pressure on these systems
 - Reduce movement by expediting transfer to the FSS at the time of death
 - Minimize hospital storage;
4. Ensure capacity of health care system by reducing possible redundancies
 - Pull death certification and storage out of hospitals and LTC sector to reduce burden
 - Health and LTC systems can focus on services for living patients and residents.

5. Maintain professional standards for delivery of services (e.g. identification of bodies, thorough investigations, respectful management of deceased persons, communicating with families)
 - Ensure information support for all sectors

Coordinated Approach: BAO and OCC

For BAO/FSS: Realigned services from funerals and visitations to transfer of deceased, providing additional staffing capacity. They have worked with OCC to develop a process for receiving deceased persons into their care that minimizes entry into hospital/LTC facilities. The BAO have established a solid plan for local services and have contemplated a regional approach should specific areas require assistance. Collectively there is capacity within Ontario's funeral services sector so additional storage should not be required.

For OCC: Established two 24/7 teams to manage expedited response to natural deaths in the hospital/LTC facilities and in the community. The following section details the process for these teams.

Responding to Natural Deaths (including COVID-19)

OCC Team 1: Hospital and LTC Deaths (24/7 Team)

- Hospitals/LTC work with families to promptly determine a funeral service provider; timeframe between time of death and FSS activation is aimed at one hour for hospitals and three hours for LTC
- OCC Team receives information from hospitals/LTC required to complete Medical Certificate of Death (MCOB) by OCC member and electronically transmits to FSS
- FSS attends hospital/LTC but does not enter facility. FSS staff meet at release area and bring deceased person into their care from hospital/LTC staff.
 - Restricts building access to hospital/LTC by FSS – reducing potential contamination on either side
 - Prudent use of PPE
 - Decrease need for hospital/LTC morgue storage
 - Prevents overburdening of FSS
 - Hospital/LTC staff can focus on services to living patients

OCC Team 2: Natural Deaths in Community (24/7 Team)

- OCC/OFPS Provincial Dispatch receives call about a death in the community. If it is a natural (including COVID-19) death, call will be redirected to the Community Team 2.

- Community team speaks to first responder (and family member if available) regarding circumstances of death, medical history etc.
- Community team in discussion with the first responder will determine if coroner involvement is required.
- If there are no circumstances that raise concern for further investigation by a coroner, instead of waiting for a physician to attend to complete the MCOB, the body will be transferred to the funeral home and OCC/OFPS will facilitate death certification.
 - Prompt care and management of deceased persons
 - Expedites transfer of deceased to the funeral home
 - Timely support for grieving family members
 - Physician or coroner does not need to attend for natural deaths
 - Physicians can focus their services to living patients
 - Coroners can focus their services on their public safety mandate
 - Timely return to service for first responders

In developing this process, it was vitally important it was built on a foundation of respect, dignity and caring with recognition that each person was an important part of a family, friends and community network. If everyone works together across the systems, this plan will be responsive to an increased need for service in a dignified and respectful manner.

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