

ANNEX F
Department of
the Chief Medical
Examiner
Operations



Decorative Image

Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan
SEPTEMBER 2026

Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization and County of San Diego

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This annex defines the role of the Department of the Medical Examiner during and following a disaster, and discusses statewide Mutual Aid. The Department of the Medical Examiner is responsible for setting up Medical Examiner Emergency Teams, temporary morgues, search and recovery teams for remains, and the procurement and allocation of supplies and resources. The Department of the Medical Examiner is also responsible for the identification and listing of the victims, the notification of next of kin, and in some cases establishing a Family Assistance Center (FAC).

GENERAL

PURPOSE

Annex F defines the actions, roles, and expectations necessary to provide a coordinated response to incidents resulting in mass fatalities in San Diego County.

SCOPE

The San Diego County Department of the Medical Examiner is the agency responsible for investigating deaths primarily resulting from sudden and unexpected causes, and certifying the cause and manner of such deaths, in San Diego County, according to California Government Code Section 27491, and Health and Safety Code Section 102850. With that responsibility, the Medical Examiner also has a role in identifying victims of mass fatality incidences, and in storage of human remains until final disposition can be made. The Medical Examiner will operate under normal procedures unless one or more of the following conditions exists:

- The number of fatalities overwhelms Medical Examiner local resources.
- Conditions in the recovery of bodies present a hazard to personnel, i.e., hazardous materials, radiation, etc.
- Access to Medical Examiner's facility is blocked or impeded.
- Medical Examiner's facility is severely damaged.
- A local pandemic exists limiting the availability of Medical Examiner staff.

OBJECTIVES

The overall objectives of the Medical Examiner operations will be to:

- Recover, identify and facilitate adequate disposition of human remains.
- Coordinate evidence identification and collection with the appropriate law enforcement agency.
- Determine the cause and manner of death.
- Inventory and protect the personal effects of the deceased.

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- Prepare and coordinate the list of deceased, both identified and unidentified.
 - Notify next of kin.
 - Process and maintain necessary records.
 - Coordinate information and notification with local law enforcement jurisdictions, public health, and other related agencies.
 - Facilitate timely public information release through coordination with County Public Information agencies, the Joint Information Center (JIC) if the Operational Area (OA) Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated, and the agencies involved in the incident response.

Whole Community Approach

The San Diego Operational Area is committed to achieving and fostering an emergency management system that uses a Whole Community Approach and is fully inclusive of individual needs and circumstances. For further details on the Whole Community Approach to emergency management and the integration of inclusive emergency management practices, refer to the Basic Plan.

CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

Partial or full activation of this annex shall be by the direction of the Chief Medical Examiner or his designated representative.

In general, when activated, the Medical Examiner will change daily operations to meet the requirements of the emergency, and, as required, will be inserted into the standard National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) model activated by the County Office of Emergency Services (OES). The most likely changes will be to temporarily expand the capacity to store human remains, property and evidence, and to temporarily expand communication capabilities, especially concerning communication with the next-of-kin of victims. The Medical Examiner will maintain usual operations, expanding in the necessary areas, with assistance from outside agencies (as described below), including use of the California Coroner's Mutual Aid Agreement, depending on the situation, and the US Department of Health and Human Services' Disaster Mortuary Operations Response Teams (DMORT).

ORGANIZATION AND ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

ORGANIZATION

The Chief Medical Examiner shall direct and coordinate all medical examiner-related objectives and services within the Operational Area.

When possible, the Medical Examiner will coordinate operations from the Medical Examiner Facility. Depending on the extent of the activation of this annex, the Medical Examiner or representative will direct emergency operations from the Operational Area (OA) Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The organization and assignment of responsibility for Medical Examiner's functions is summarized in the sections that follow.

ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

The Medical Examiner's responsibilities include:

- Designate a Disaster Control Staff Coordinator.
- Establish a Medical Examiner representative and integrate the position into the management structure at the OA EOC.
- Establish Field Medical Examiner and Collection Teams.
- Establish Field or Site Body Collection Locations.
- Establish a FAC.
- Implement a record keeping system for number and identity of fatalities.
- Establish body storage and examination facilities and transportation.
- Coordinate with search and recovery teams for body recovery.
- Coordinate with Law Enforcement and the Public Administrator's Office for recording, storage and protection of the personal effects of the deceased.
- Notify next of kin (NoK) of identified decedents:
 - In-person notification.
 - In-person notification at FAC.
 - Law enforcement or local Medical Examiner notification in area of NoK.
 - Telephone or mail notification.
- Coordinate the services of:
 - Funeral Directors
 - Dentists
 - Chaplain Corp
 - American Red Cross
 - Salvation Army
 - X-Ray Technicians
 - California Coroner Mutual Aid Agencies and/or DMORT
 - Decedent transportation agencies
 - Other supporting agencies (see "Support Functions", below)
- Establish requests for mutual aid, if required, in accordance with the California Medical Examiner/Coroner's Mutual Aid System, the US Department of Health and Human Services DMORT, or the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC).
- Determine disposition of human remains. In the event of mass fatalities beyond the local burial capacity, establish pre-designated temporary burial locations and a system, including marking graves for potential future recovery, in conjunction with the County Public Health Officer (PHO).
- Facilitate timely release of accurate public information pertaining to the incident, through coordination with County public information agencies, and otherwise respond to public inquiry through the Family Assistance Center.

SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

BODY COLLECTION SITE

Whenever possible, the Medical Examiner team responds to the location of the body for recovery. In the event of multiple casualties or inaccessible recovery areas, a Body Collection Site could not be established in the field. Depending upon the circumstances of the event, the Medical Examiner will employ its mobile morgue vehicle, mobile morgue trailers, and/or tents to hold recovered bodies at the Body Collection Site. In mass fatality incidences involving broad areas of the OA, multiple regional Body Collection Sites may be established. The Body Collection Site will be a designated point for the collection of all recovered bodies.

The Medical Examiner Field Emergency Team(s) will work at the Body Collection Site performing the following functions:

- Affixing identification bands or tags to remains, and logging recovered bodies as they are received.
- Preliminary identification of remains.
- Label and log all property and personal effects.
- Prepare remains for transportation to the Medical Examiner.

MASS FATALITY/TEMPORARY MORGUE/FAMILY ASSISTANCE CENTER FACILITY

In mass fatality incidents, temporary refrigeration containers will be used to augment the Medical Examiner's Office permanent capacity. When the fatality numbers exceed the expanded capacity of the Medical Examiner facility, or the facility is unusable, the Medical Examiner will establish a Temporary Field Morgue. The National Disaster Medical System's (NDMS) DMORT team is available to assist in the establishment of the Temporary Field Morgue. During an emergency response, DMORTs work under the guidance of the local Medical Examiner by providing technical assistance, personnel, and equipment to recover, identify, and process deceased victims. The functions of a Temporary Field Morgue will be:

- Receive and log the remains into a systematic accounting system with a unique identifying number, and place bodies in proper temporary storage.
- Identify a preliminary cause and manner of death.
- Catalog, secure, and make proper disposition of property and personal effects.
- Identify remains.
- Provide wellness counseling for staff.
- Maintain necessary reports and records.



Facility

The Ideal Temporary Morgue Facility should be:

- A large facility with cold-storage capability or open area for cold-storage trailers and a receiving area away from the front entrance.
- Equipped with showers, water, electricity, parking areas, Internet, and telephone communications.
- Fenced or locked for security.
- Equipped with an office/administrative area.

Staff

Depending on the incident, the Temporary Field Morgue staff includes the following:

- Medical Examiner Field Emergency Teams
- Law enforcement for security
- Outside x-ray technologist (non-Medical Examiner staff)
- Dentists
- Anthropologists
- Forensic Autopsy Assistants/Embalmers
- Toxicology laboratory personnel
- Clerical staff
- Transportation coordinators

Equipment

Depending on the incident, the Temporary Field Morgue Equipment needs include the following:

- Cold storage capability (i.e., mobile refrigerator vans, trucks, trailers, or Conex containers)
- Dental and portable whole body x-ray equipment

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- Computers/telephones/radios communication to field agents
 - Office and record keeping supplies
 - Portable autopsy tables
 - Source of running water
 - Source of electricity
 - Lighting source
 - Laptops and wireless/cellular internet access
 - Body pouches
 - Bar-coding equipment, if available
 - Generator(s)

Family Assistance Center (FAC)¹

In mass fatality incidents, Family Assistance Centers will be used to:

- Provide a safe location to notify the families of the status of their loved ones.
- Guide families through the administrative processes regarding identification of their loved ones and final disposition. *(They may not be able or allowed to reclaim the body depending on the incident or condition of the bodies.)*
- Provide appropriate emotional support for grieving families by coordinating meetings with mental health and social services.
- Collect information from the next of kin, including descriptions of their missing loved ones, contact information for the dentist or prior treating healthcare facilities of their missing loved one, and samples for DNA comparison, to facilitate identification of remains.

Victim Identification Data Collection

The FAC is the primary location for collecting antemortem data for victims of a mass fatality incident for identification purposes. In the event of a natural disaster, such as flood or earthquake, the FAC could be a portion of the County Family Reunification Center, which will also be a data collection point to gather information to reunify separated family members.

Family Interview Process

The Medical Examiner's Office requires antemortem data for identification of remains. This information will be gathered from family members by means of an interview with an investigator, mortuary officer, or staff assigned to the FAC. During the interview, family members will be asked to provide very detailed information regarding their loved one's body and medical history, especially the location of any existing dental or other x-rays and could involve the collection of a sample from a relative for DNA comparison (such as a mouth/cheek swabbing or saliva). Interviewers will collect this information in a caring and compassionate manner. Information collected will be compared to postmortem data for identification purposes. Translators may be required and must be used as appropriate to sufficiently meet the needs of the family during the interview.

¹ San Diego County Department of the Medical Examiner: Family Assistance Center Operations Guide (Campman M.D., Steven, May 2019)

FAC Location

The facility should be located away from the disaster site and the morgue. Access to the FAC should be easy and the site should have ample free parking. The facility must be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and have support staff available to assist people with access and functional needs. The location must be large enough to accommodate the following rooms/spaces:

- **Family Briefing Room:** Briefings by the Medical Examiner, National Transportation Safety Board, Federal Bureau of Investigations or other agencies take place in the Family Briefing Room. The room should comfortably accommodate 150-300 people (the actual size of the room will be incident specific).
- **Reception Area:** Required to evaluate needs of family members or any visitors to the facility.
- **Family Interview /Death Notification Rooms:** Private rooms that will accommodate up to 10 people.
- **DNA Sample Collection Room**
- **Family Refreshment Room**
- **Restrooms**
- **Childcare Room**
- **Chapel**
- **Information Resources Center:** Houses database administration, network/technical support.
- **Administrative Office Space:** Work area for Medical Examiner and members of other governmental agencies such as the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), chaplaincy, security, mental health, etc.
- **Designated media area** that is located away from families.

TEMPORARY BURIAL

Necessary Conditions

Temporary burial may become necessary when the number of victims becomes a public health hazard and the dead cannot be:

- Adequately refrigerated or embalmed to prevent decomposition.
- Released to the next of kin.
- Transported to and/or cared for by cemeteries, mausoleums, crematoriums, etc.

Joint Decision

The decision to begin temporary burial must be made jointly by the Chief Medical Examiner, County Public Health Officer, the County's Director of Emergency Services (CAO), OES, the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), and applicable city/special district officials and leaders within the community.

Location

The site of temporary burial must also be agreed upon by the above agencies. Ideally, an existing cemetery would be the most logical location for temporary burial. However, should this type of site not be available, County-owned open space, parks and recreational areas,

flood control basins (weather permitting), sides of freeways, areas beneath power lines, areas along rail lines, and rail yards are suggested alternate sites.

Record Keeping and Final Disposition

The burial, preservation and record keeping system (grids and numbers) will be supervised by the Medical Examiner. Efforts will be made to mark graves for potential future recovery. Further disposition of buried bodies would be handled by the Medical Examiner in conjunction with the next of kin, local authorities, and cooperating funeral homes.

SUPPORT FUNCTION ROLES

The following agencies/departments have potential roles supporting this annex, as follows:

- **Public Administrator's Office, County of San Diego:** Property of deceased
- **General Services, County of San Diego:** Provide equipment and supplies
- **Purchasing and Contracting, County of San Diego:** Purchasing emergency supplies and services
- **Department of Environmental Health and Quality (DEHQ), County of San Diego:** Public health hazard of un-disposed remains; environmental safety for Medical Examiner Field Teams
- **American Red Cross (ARC) and Salvation Army:** Assist with the FAC; Public Inquiry Report record keeping assistance
- **County Communications Office (CCO), County of San Diego:** Assist with media and public requests
- **Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) Behavioral Health, County of San Diego:** Critical incident stress management
- **Emergency Medical Services (EMS), County of San Diego:** Temporary morgue
- **County Technology Office (CTO):** Technology and communications support
- **Fire departments/districts:** Temporary morgue
- **Law enforcement agencies:** Medical Examiner Field Teams; field security; property security; FAC security
- **Dentists, x-ray technicians and anthropologists:** Identification process
- **Funeral Directors:** private transportation and disposition of remains
- **Transportation Companies:** Transportation and recovery of remains
- **2-1-1 San Diego:** Provide referrals to local organizations offering spontaneous volunteer opportunities.
- **San Diego County Chaplain Corp:** Provide appropriate emotional and/or faith support to agencies and/or individuals needing assistance
- **San Diego County Disaster Rapid Assessment Team:** Provide necessary assistance for the AFN community

- **US Department of Health and Human Services:** DMORT assistance with all Medical Examiner functions and duties under the coordination of the local Medical Examiner



- **California Governor's Office of Emergency Services:** Provide state mutual aid for Medical Examiner/Coroner functions and duties as requested by the local Medical Examiner
- **National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB):** Establish FAC in the event of a transportation accident resulting in a major loss of life

DIRECTION, CONTROL, OR COORDINATION

The Chief Medical Examiner shall direct and coordinate all Medical Examiner-related objectives and services within the OA. The level and extent of the activation of this annex is contingent on the actual event and the severity of the conditions.

LEVEL I RESPONSE: The Chief Medical Examiner or their designee will direct and coordinate operations from the OA EOC. All employees will be assigned to the emergency. It is likely that all aspects of this annex will be activated. Normal operations will possibly be suspended for the duration of the emergency.

LEVEL II RESPONSE: The Chief Medical Examiner or their designee will direct and coordinate operations either from the Medical Examiner & Forensic Center, a secondary headquarters, or the OA EOC. On-duty and called-back employees will be assigned to the emergency as needed. Normal operations will possibly be suspended for the duration of the emergency.

LEVEL III RESPONSE: The Chief Medical Examiner or their designee will direct and coordinate operations from the Medical Examiner & Forensic Center. On-duty personnel will immediately be assigned to the emergency. Normal operations will continue as called-back employees arrive to work.



NOTIFICATION AND CALL-BACK

Upon notification of an emergency or disaster, all Medical Examiner staff will contact their supervisor, or appropriate person in the chain of command, as soon as possible for assignment. If communications cannot be established with the supervisor, or appropriate person within the chain of command, personnel are to report to the closest Sheriff's substation or police station and report their location via law enforcement radio.

MEDICAL EXAMINER FIELD EMERGENCY TEAMS

The Chief Medical Examiner will determine the need for utilizing Medical Examiner Field Emergency Teams, depending on the nature and the condition of the emergency. A Medical Examiner Field Emergency Team will consist of some or all of the following staff:

- Deputy Medical Examiner
- Medical Examiner Investigator
- Law enforcement officer (field investigation, security)
- Contract removal and transportation personnel
- Forensic Autopsy Assistants
- Clerical staff (record keeping, reports)

INFORMATION COLLECTION AND DISSEMINATION

Information collection and dissemination are among the Medical Examiner's most important functions.

NOTIFICATION OF DEATHS

In the event of a mass fatality incident, the Medical Examiner will likely be notified of deaths by multiple sources, including hospitals, law enforcement, fire and rescue agencies, and possibly members of the community. In a mass fatality incident, the Medical Examiner will likely establish and publicize a dedicated phone number to receive notification of deaths and to handle inquiries pertaining to the incident.

- Hospitals will report deaths to the Medical Examiner, directly or through County Public Health's Departmental Operations Center (DOC), commonly known as the Medical Operations Center (MOC). If the death is under jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner or the hospital's morgue capacity is exceeded, the Medical Examiner will coordinate removal of the remains from the hospital. The report will include the number of dead, any identifying information, and the presumed cause of death.
- At a mass fatality scene, deaths will be reported through the Incident Command structure, for accounting and planning the Medical Examiner's response.
- Telephone or radio communications are the most likely mechanisms of communication from law enforcement agencies, other first responders, and hospitals.
- The Medical Examiner representative at the OA EOC will be the liaison between the Medical Examiner, those on-scene, and other County and responding agencies. The representative will share information about fatality statistics and Medical Examiner response capabilities.

OTHER COLLECTION OF INFORMATION

Information about missing persons and those thought to have been killed will be collected from next of kin at the FAC (as above), or by personal or telephone interview by a Medical Examiner's Investigator. The primary goal of this communication is to facilitate identification of the deceased.

RELEASE OF INFORMATION

The Medical Examiner will use a coordinated release of information to the media through the Joint Information Center (JIC) of the OA EOC. The Medical Examiner web page will include updated press releases as soon as possible. The Medical Examiner will hold family briefings prior to press conferences.

As with any death falling under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner, it is the responsibility of the Medical Examiner to ensure that the next of kin is notified of the death.

COMMUNICATIONS

Various County government departments utilize voice radio communications in the furtherance of their duties. These departments operate on the Regional Communications System (RCS) and have been assigned their own talk groups. Countywide and mutual aid talk groups provide the ability for these departments to talk to each other and with other RCS agencies. When required, these agencies coordinate via the Sheriff's Communications Center. The Medical Examiner is a member of RCS.

ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

There are some City and County personnel who do not have specific task assignments. They are automatically designated by State Law as Disaster Service Workers during a disaster and may serve many functions in the Family Assistance Center (FAC) if opened, such as assisting with registration and other administrative needs, FAC site maintenance, helping to maintain information technology, serving as Family Escorts, interviewing families, assisting with conveniences (i.e., meals, coffee, blankets, etc.), assisting with a call center, and providing information assistance in navigating the FAC and/or the local area.

- "All public employees and all registered volunteers of a jurisdiction having an accredited disaster council are Disaster Service Workers," per Government Code Title I, Division 4, Chapter 8, and Labor Code, Part I, Division 4, Chapters 1 and 10.
- The term public employees include all persons employed by the State, or any County, City or public district.
- Other personnel including volunteers can be registered by OES as Disaster Service Workers, which provides Workers Compensation and liability coverage.

Vital records of the Department of the Medical Examiner are routinely stored in a secured location at the various divisions of the Department in printed hard copy form and electronically.² All Information Technology Services are managed by the County Technology Office (CTO).

² County of San Diego Department of the Medical Examiner Continuity of Operations Plan, June 2021

LOGISTICS

During normal day-to-day operations the Medical Examiner will prepare and update these emergency plans, Standard Operating Procedures, pre-arranged agreements, Statements or Memorandum of Understanding or Agreements, resource listings, and checklists. For most administration, finance, and logistics, the Medical Examiner will use its existing Administrative Services, as the Medical Examiner's daily function is generally the same as it is in mass fatality incidences, although on a smaller scale. Acquisition of equipment or other resources unique to mass fatality responses will be coordinated through the Logistics Section of the Emergency Operations Center and the Departments of General Services and Purchasing and Contracting, and other Departments, as appropriate.

The Medical Examiner participates in the California Coroner Mutual Aid Plan and its planning and maintenance; has a Statement of Understanding with the American Red Cross regarding its role with the Medical Examiner in mass fatality response and maintains contracts with contractor companies for supply of supplies like body pouches and personal protective equipment.

ANNEX DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

This annex is a product of the OA Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). As such, the policies, procedures, and practices outlined in the OA EOP govern this annex. OES is subject to coordinate the maintenance and update of this annex every four years, in accordance with the maintenance schedule established for the OA EOP. Record of changes, approval, and dissemination of the OA EOP will also apply to this annex.

Updates to this annex can be made before such time for multiple reasons, including but not limited to changes in policy/procedure, improvements and recommendations based on real life events or exercises, etc. Recommended changes should be submitted to OES at oes@sdcounty.ca.gov

This annex was originally prepared by the Unified San Diego County Emergency Services Organization, staff and principal planners.

AUTHORITIES AND REFERENCES

The San Diego County Department of the Medical Examiner is the agency responsible for investigating deaths primarily resulting from sudden and unexpected causes, and certifying the cause and manner of such deaths, in San Diego County, according to California Government Code Section 27491, and Health and Safety Code Section 102850.

Additional information and guidance on Medical Examiner mass fatality response is available from the National Association of Medical Examiners (The National Association of Medical Examiners Standard Operating Procedures for Mass Fatality Management), the California State Coroner Mutual Aid Plan, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Guidelines for Handling Decedents Contaminated with Radioactive Materials).

ATTACHMENT 1 – MEDICAL EMERGENCY ACTION CHECKLIST (EXAMPLE)

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY
Staff OA EOC	Medical Examiner
Coordinate Medical Examiner Field Teams	Medical Examiner / Law Enforcement
Dispatch Chaplains to Family Assistance Center and incident sites to provide emotional and/or faith support to agencies or individuals needing assistance	Medical Examiner
Establish Body Collection Sites	Medical Examiner
Determine and procure additional supplies	Medical Examiner / OES / General Services / Purchasing and Contracting
Set up reporting / record keeping system	Medical Examiner
Determine transportation needs and route status	Medical Examiner
Establish field morgue, if needed	Medical Examiner
Assign support personnel for identification and field processing	Medical Examiner
Coordinate with law enforcement for security	Medical Examiner / Law Enforcement
Notification of next of kin	Medical Examiner
Response to public inquiry	Medical Examiner / OES / County Communications Office / American Red Cross / Salvation Army / 2-1-1
Provide and release information to the public	Medical Examiner / OES / County Communications Office
Request Mutual Aid, as needed	Medical Examiner / OES
Establish Family Assistance Center or staff FAC portion of County Family Reunification Center	Medical Examiner / American Red Cross / OES