Category V

Criterion 5K: Coroner Scene Investigation Services

The agency operates an adequate, effective and efficient Coroner Scene Investigation program that responds to and investigates all unattended deaths in Douglas County. This criterion report applies to agencies that have direct responsibility for operating programs that provide Coroner Scene Investigation services.

If the agency determines this criterion is not applicable, the agency shall provide a brief explanation of why it does not provide this program.

Summary:

Kansas State statues require individual counties to provide coroner services to its citizens. Douglas County has contracted with the Kansas City, Kansas private partnership Frontier Forensics, P.A. to provide these services. In conjunction with Frontier Forensics, P.A., the Department administers a Coroner Scene Investigation (CSI) program. The Division Chief of Prevention oversees the program. A contractual agreement with Douglas County establishes program funding. Management and direct supervision of the program is provided by the administrative Lieutenant-Paramedic in the Prevention Division. Seven Coroner Scene Investigators, cover each of the three 24-hour shifts. The goal of the CSI program is to assist the Coroner in the determination of cause and manner of death for all unattended deaths in Douglas County. This is through scene investigation, information gathering, witness interviews and follow-up activities necessary to aid the Coroner in the determination of cause of death. The investigators receive extensive training and certification from the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators (ABMDI) as well as ongoing training and continuing education in all aspects of coroner scene investigation throughout the course of their appointment. They work independently from the standard department structure, alongside representatives of other agencies such as law enforcement, hospitals, and other medical organizations. Department Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) guide the specific activities of investigations. Frontier Forensics, P.A. receives, evaluates and stores investigation documents. Continual program monitoring and evaluation ensure quality investigation and allow for program improvements.
Performance Indicators:

CC  5K.1  Given its standards of cover and emergency deployment objectives, the agency meets its staffing, response time, station(s), extinguishing agency requirements, apparatus, and equipment deployment objectives for each type and magnitude of Coroner Scene Investigation services incidents.

Description

Seven incentive personnel provide staffing as Coroner Scene Investigators (CSI). CSI selection occurs through a competitive application process, and is open to fulltime paramedics. CSI’s receive specialized training and certification from the American Board of Medicolegal Death Investigators. Compensation up to 7.5% of base salary covers the additional responsibilities and training. Two CSI positions provide coverage for each 24-hour shift.

Due to the non-emergency response for dispatching CSI’s to death scenes, response times vary greatly. The jurisdictional law enforcement agency will request a CSI response from the on-duty Shift Commander, who will in turn assign the call to an on-duty or on-call CSI. The CSI will then self-initiate the incident with Dispatch upon going en route to the scene. The law enforcement request does not result in call log in Dispatch and consequently, there is no record of the total time between the request for a CSI and arrival on scene. Department SOPs state that investigations will be performed in a “timely manner” and in cases of on-call status, the on-call CSI is required to “respond to notifications within 15 minutes and be able to respond to the scene...within 45 minutes.”

The non-emergency nature of a Coroner Scene Investigation entails significantly longer response times than other Department responses. There are numerous reasons for the longer response times: CSIs must often wait for personnel to relieve them from their current assignment before responding to a scene; the CSI must sometimes stop at another station to obtain additional equipment before proceeding to the scene; the nature of the scene may require the retrieval of the Investigation Unit housed in the Investigation Facility or some other unforeseen delay.
The CSI generally responds in a Department utility pick-up truck, although the Departments Investigation Unit is available for complex incidents. CSI’s are capable of independently assessing scenes, interfacing with law enforcement, requesting additional resources, and conducting investigations. This includes photographic and written documentation of the scene, hands-on investigative work, and interviewing relevant individuals. At the conclusion of the scene investigation, the CSI follows established procedures for transporting the body to Frontier Forensics, P.A., prepares written reports, and obtains relevant medical records and other information as directed by the Coroner.

While the two investigators assigned to each shift are able to perform the vast majority of scene investigations that occur on their shift, circumstances such as ongoing emergency incidents, simultaneous investigations, and absences (scheduled or unscheduled) can occasionally prevent on-duty investigators from responding to a death scene in a timely manner. Off-duty investigators assuming on-call status as described in Department SOPs, cover unscheduled absences. The program manager shall be available for scene investigations. As a last resort or as defined in 113.21 Coroner Scene Investigations, staff members from the Frontier Forensics, P.A. main office will respond.

The CSI program manager ensures all continuing education requirements are met by each CSI investigator. A competitive process of line personnel determines CSI selection. All new investigators are required to complete a skills and knowledge workbook required for ABMDI certification testing. The CSI program manager ensures compliance with needed workbook completion.

Appraisal
The department meets the Coroner’s expectation of having a trained and certified CSI investigate every death scene that is potentially a coroner’s case. The current SOP on CSIs does not address a consistent practice of initiating CSI response. The SOP does not detail how to record incident and call times and the required staffing levels for the
Department to meet the goal of timely response to all unattended deaths in Douglas County.

**Plan**
The department will maintain a minimum of seven CSIs trained as nationally registered Medico-Legal Death Investigators. The Program Manager will continue to perform routine call volume and capabilities reviews and monitor to identify any additional personnel or resource needs. New SOP language will be sent out for public comment to ensure a consistent process of dispatching and recording call times.

**References**
Coroner Scene Investigations SOP 113.20
Coroner Scene Investigator Incentive SOP 111.12
Lawrence Douglas County Fire Medical Roster
CC 5K.2  The agency conducts a formal and documented appraisal, at least annually, that includes an analysis of response procedures, equipment, training, and after action reports to determine the effectiveness of the coroner’s scene investigation services program and meeting the agency's goals and objectives.

Description
The Department hosts a monthly meeting for all stakeholders in the CSI program. In addition to Department CSIs and administrators, these stakeholders include county and municipal law enforcement representatives, members of the District Attorney’s office, and representatives from Frontier Forensics, P.A. These multi-agency meetings serve as a clearinghouse for reviewing previous cases, addressing issues that may arise either from actual incidents or from general trends in the death investigation community, and discussing ways to improve the program. Case review and supplemental presentations during meetings provide continuing education for the CSIs on various forensic subjects. The CSI program manager reviews all case reports and forms for accuracy and compliance. The CSI program manager communicates regularly with the Assistant County Administrator on performance, budgeting, training and equipment needs. The Department’s Monthly Activity report includes information on the CSI Program, such as budgeting expenditures and service demand. The Fire Chief shares this report monthly with the Authority Having Jurisdiction.

CSI program administrators conduct meetings on an as-needed basis to discuss specific subjects or concerns in more detail. Department program managers’ meet monthly and discuss issues related to the Coroner Scene Investigator program as during the annual program appraisal.

Appraisal
The most effective way to evaluate the CSI program’s performance as a whole is to evaluate the performance at every individual incident. Input from all stakeholders is necessary to ensure a thorough discussion of all aspects of an investigation, and to ensure consistent work practices. To give full attention to each investigation, the volume of CSI
cases does not permit a meeting schedule greater than one month apart. The rapidly advancing state of forensic science also requires frequent updates from specialists from Frontier Forensics, P.A.

Therefore, the current schedule of a recurring monthly meeting for case review and program updates between all stakeholders is the most effective way to perform appraisals of the effectiveness and efficiency of the CSI program. Sharing of lessons learned, problems, and best practices occurs within a month of identification. In general, the meeting structure, participants, and frequency are currently adequate and effective at ensuring high quality and consistency for CSI services.

Regular meetings provide a wider perspective for evaluating the CSI program, especially with regard to how this program interfaces with other Department activities. Combined with the monthly CSI meetings, these two methods of program analysis are adequate and effective at reviewing the overall structure and performance of the CSI program.

**Plan**

The CSI program manager will continue to hold regularly scheduled Coroner Scene Investigator meetings each month and conduct an annual program appraisal. Special circumstances may result in additional meetings between the entire CSI program team, specific individuals, program managers, and/or outside stakeholders, as the need arises. Ultimate responsibility for ensuring the success and efficacy of the CSI program rests with Department administration, and monitoring of all Department programs will continue during the quarterly meetings.

**References**

Activity Calendar appointments for CSI meetings
Monthly Activity report
CSI Annual program appraisal