



Department of Health

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April 19, 2020

DAL: BFD 20-04
Subject: Updated COVID-19 Guidance for
Health Care Facilities Regarding
Management of Decedent Personal Effects

Dear Health Care Facilities:

In response to multiple inquiries regarding the management of decedent personal effects during the COVID-19 public health emergency, the NYS Department of Health (the Department) Bureau of Funeral Directing is distributing the following guidance from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's (OCME) Biological Incident Fatality Surge Plan for Managing In- and Out-of-Hospital Deaths, to assist health care facilities in New York City (NYC). This guidance, while developed for health care facilities in New York City, can also be used as a general guideline for other counties and municipalities. Please check with your local county or municipality for any additional requirements.

- Health care facilities (HCFs) manage decedent personal effects (PE) on a daily basis. This function will continue, and may need to accommodate a surge in need during this unprecedented emergency. As with tracking of decedents, tracking personal effects must be performed with 100% accuracy, due to the importance of these items to family members. Chain of custody must be documented from when items are collected after death to their release to the appropriate entity (i.e. next of kin, law enforcement, etc).
- HCFs should prepare to store personal effects for an extended period of time. A secure facility should be chosen that will be large enough to handle a significant quantity of personal effects. Decedent personal effects can be packaged per hospital protocol, but during a surge, personnel should ensure items are well-sealed prior to labeling. Plastic bins may be useful in organizing large amounts of PE. HCFs should avoid utilizing several smaller facilities. All PE should be tagged with a unique identifier, as well as the unique identifier of the decedent, to allow for reassociation.
- It is unlikely decedent personal effects will have evidentiary value in a biological incident, even criminal, due to the incubation period required for all concerning pathogens.

However, during a criminal incident, law enforcement may request personal effects be released to them for further analysis.

In consultation with our epidemiology staff, the Department is providing this additional guidance for managing the personal belongings of deceased patients or residents confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19 at healthcare facilities. Certain recommendations may only be applicable in long-stay settings, such as nursing homes.

Preparation for Storage of Personal Effects

- Identify a clean, secure room, large enough to store the anticipated amount of personal effects (PE).
- Obtain boxes and bags necessary for storage. Clear plastic containers and bags might be preferable, as they allow contents to be seen.
- Educate staff on the policies and procedures in place at your facility.

Handling of Personal Effects

General guidelines:

- Wear disposable gloves when handling all PE of the deceased resident. Additional personal protective equipment (PPE) can be worn in accordance with your facility's current policies and practices.
- Wash your hands with soap and water, for a minimum of 20 seconds, or use alcohol-based hand rub containing at least 60% alcohol, after removing all PPE.
- Waste, including discarded gloves, masks, and gowns, can be disposed of using your facility's normal practices.

For clothing and other fabric items:

- Discard or launder cloth items that are wet or contaminated with bodily fluids.
- Do not shake clothing or other cloth items. Shaking contaminated cloth items might disperse the virus through the air.
- For clean, dry cloth items, either pack items directly into bags or launder the items, if feasible.

- If packing items without laundering, indicate this on the bag, and provide general instructions to the family on laundering items.
- Clothing and similar items should be laundered in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
 - If possible, launder items using the warmest appropriate water setting for the items and dry items completely.
- Dirty laundry from an ill person can be washed with other people's items.
- Clean and disinfect clothes hampers.

For other personal items (e.g. books, photos, other mementos):

- Personal items should be wiped or sprayed with a sanitizing solution that contains 70% alcohol before placing in the boxes. If an item cannot be sanitized and is not an important keepsake for the family, consider discarding; however, the item should be recorded as discarded for tracking purposes. Important items or keepsakes that cannot be easily sanitized should be placed in plastic bags before putting them into boxes.
- For electronic devices, follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning and disinfection. If no guidance is available, use wipes or sprays containing at least with 70% alcohol (such as alcohol sprays or wipes). Do not saturate device.
- Other washable hard surfaces can be wiped with surface disinfectants containing 70% alcohol.

Handling of items by family members:

- There is a possibility that when items are returned to family members, they may be handled without PPE. Given that much is unknown about this virus, it is hard to reliably predict how long virus may remain infectious on contaminated surfaces.
- Therefore, family members should be cautioned to wait at least 7 days before unpacking items from bags and boxes.

Additionally, the Bureau of Funeral Directing offers the following guidance that should be observed when releasing any decedent and their personal effects from the facility:

- If the family members are allowed to come to the facility after the death has occurred, face masks and social distancing should be practiced by the family. Personal effects should be offered to the family at this time, if not being stored in accordance with the

guidance above (i.e. family members should be cautioned to wait at least 7 days before unpacking items from bags and boxes.)

- Personal effects of the deceased should be catalogued on a property form.
- Property of the decedent should never be placed inside the shroud or body bag with the decedent.
- When releasing the remains to a funeral firm, the personal effects should be offered to the funeral director. Most firms will accept personal effects as a courtesy to the family, but they are not obligated to accept them, and some funeral providers have policies prohibiting it.
- If the funeral firm accepts the personal effects, the facility should have the funeral firm representative sign a receipt.
- When releasing remains to a Medical Examiner or any other agency outside of NYC, check the local policy regarding receiving property and chain of custody. Policies on receiving personal effects may vary widely from county to county.

As new guidance and information becomes available the most current information will be posted on the Department's COVID-19 website at <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>.

If you have any questions, please contact the Bureau of Funeral Directing by telephone at 518-402-0785 or by email at funeral@health.ny.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas W. Fuller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thomas W. Fuller, Director
Bureau of Funeral Directing