



## State of New Jersey

### DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH OFFICE OF THE CHIEF STATE MEDICAL EXAMINER

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#### Effective March 31, 2020

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been considered of sufficient severity and magnitude to warrant an emergency declaration at national and State levels. As the number of deaths related to COVID-19 continue to rise, it is essential that all health care providers, health care facilities, and medical examiners are aware of their statutory obligations. The purpose of this guideline is to accurately document the cause of death while allowing for expedient disposition of the body.

#### **Death Reporting Guidance:**

Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 26:6B-10, a Medical Examiner (ME) shall conduct a medicolegal death investigation in the case of any death from causes that might constitute a threat to public health or safety. The role of the Medical Examiner in that situation is to identify the etiology of any sentinel cases that might pose a threat to public health. That is not the case with COVID-19, given declared emergencies and its well-established threat to public health. Accordingly, a diagnosis or suspected diagnosis of COVID-19 does not itself require reporting to the Medical Examiner's Office.

Expired patients that have a positive COVID-19 test result **should not** be reported to the Medical Examiner's Office unless the case otherwise falls under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner for any other reason such as death within 24 hours of admission to a hospital or the death is deemed suspicious or unnatural. See N.J.S.A. 26:6B-10.

#### **Death Certificate Guidance:**

If a patient expires while the patient's COVID-19 test is pending, the treating physician should complete the death certificate listing the cause of death as "Pending COVID-19 testing". The deceased can be released for disposition and an amended death certificate issued by the physician who signed the original death certificate once test results are received. In this situation, **final disposition of the remains should not be delayed pending the test results.**

With regard to Long-Term Care Facilities (LTCF), the Department of Health has recommended that when a LTCF has a resident with a positive COVID-19 test result (Patient #1) and another resident of the LTCF has exhibited symptoms of COVID-19 (Patient #2), the other resident (Patient #2) does not need to be tested because the information would not affect the public health management of the facility. If Patient #2 expires, the treating physician should sign the death certificate listing the cause of death as "Probable COVID-19 Infection".

If a LTCF does not have any residents with a positive COVID-19 test result, and a resident expires who had exhibited symptoms of COVID-19 but was not tested, the ME should treat the case as a facilitated release and have the ME personnel attend the scene to collect a nasopharyngeal swab to submit for COVID-19 testing. If resources (personnel, COVID-19 test kits, etc.) are not available, the case shall be released and the cause of death listed as "Probable COVID-19 Infection".