



# **Decedent Affairs Guide**

Massachusetts General Hospital  
Office of Decedent Affairs

Phone: 617-643-7550



Massachusetts General Hospital  
Boston, MA 02114  
Tel: 617-643-7550  
[www.massgeneral.org](http://www.massgeneral.org)

Dear family members and loved ones,

We want to express our deepest condolences for your loss. Losing a loved one can be a very stressful and difficult time. The Office of Decedent Affairs is a central resource for all questions and concerns you may have while making final arrangements.

We will make every effort to provide the support you need during this time and can place you in contact with spiritual care, bereavement groups, and social services per your request.

Inside this packet, you will find a list of resources and checklists to help you find a funeral home, request an autopsy, fill out paperwork, and answer important questions regarding support services and financial government resources.

The Office of Decedent Affairs is open from 7 am to 4 pm 7 days a week. We can be reached at 617-643-7550. In addition, please visit our website [www.massgeneral.org/decedent-affairs](http://www.massgeneral.org/decedent-affairs) which provides more information and links to important government websites referenced in this packet.

Kind Regards,

Decedent Affairs Coordinators

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## Decedent Affairs Checklist

### Request or Decline Autopsy

- A member of the clinical care team will contact the family shortly after death to offer a hospital autopsy.
- If requested, you must be listed as the Health Care Proxy (HCP) or next of kin. The order of the legal **next-of-kin** in the State of Massachusetts is:

- HCP
- Surviving Spouse
- Children and Descendants
- Parents
- Siblings
- Grandparents

### Choose a funeral home

- Funeral homes will make arrangements for transport, burial/cremation, and obtain a copy of the **death certificate** for the family.
- Gather documents for funeral home services

- **Obtain Death Certificate** (10-15 certified copies)
  - Obtained by the funeral director or per request at Boston City Hall, which may take several days after death.
  - The death certificate will allow you to update important financial information associated with the decedent, such as closing out bank accounts, canceling credit cards, and contacting the life insurance agency.
- **Inform**
  - Banks and financial institutions
  - Creditors and credit agencies to prevent identity theft.
  - Credit Card Company
  - Your Attorney
- **Inform Social Security**
- **Delete or memorialize social media**
- **Request the Autopsy Report (If requested)**
  - See details on page

## Important Phone Numbers

### Massachusetts General Hospital

Main Number	617-726-2000
Chaplain Services	617-726-2220
Decedent Affairs Office	617-643-7550
Medical Records	617-726-2361
Patient Advocacy	617-726-3370
Social Work	617-726-2643

### Off MGH Campus

Boston Police Department	617-343-4250
City Hall Registry Division	617-635-4175
Department of Transitional Assistance Burial Unit	877-382-2363
Office of Chief Medical Examiner	617-267-6767
Social Security Administration	800-772-1213
Veterans Affairs	800-827-1000
New England Donor Services	800-446-6362



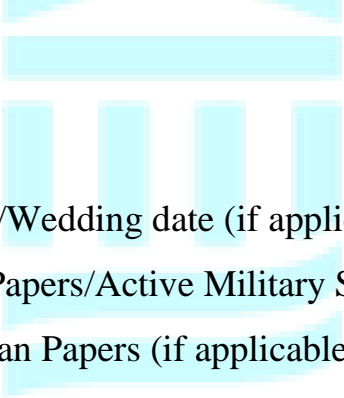
## Making Funeral Arrangements

Once you have decided upon a funeral home ,a funeral home staff member will arrange for the transport of your loved one from the hospital to their facility.

- The funeral home asks the family to sign a release authorization form required by the hospital granting permission for transport.

The funeral home may also request *some* of the following items for the funeral service and obituary:

### Funeral Home Checklist

- 
- Birth Certificate
  - Residential address
  - Recent Photograph
  - Marriage Certificate/Wedding date (if applicable)
  - Military Discharge Papers/Active Military Service papers (if applicable)
  - Funeral Pre-Need Plan Papers (if applicable)
  - Deeds to Cemetery Property (if applicable)
  - Life or Funeral Insurance Policies (if applicable)
  - List of the Names of Surviving Relatives (and Locations of Residence)
  - Social Security Number
  - Correct spelling of the deceased's first, middle, and last names
  - Parents' first and last names (including mother's maiden name)

## **What To Expect At A Funeral Home**

Funeral Homes and their directors are professionals licensed to help you obtain the death certificate, transport the body, plan for the memorial service, select a casket or urn, and perform a variety of functions related to the burial of your loved one.

### **What You Need To Know:**

- Once you have selected a funeral home, their staff will arrange with MGH to transfer your loved one to the funeral home.
- The funeral director will meet with the legal next-of-kin to plan for memorial service and burial and complete the paperwork necessary for the death certificate.

For a more detailed list of what to do after your loved one has died and what to take with you to the funeral home, see the Checklist for Arrangements page in this brochure or call the Office of Decedent Affairs at 617-643-7550.



## Funeral and Burial Assistance

Funeral and burial payment assistance is available pending certain eligibility requirements. Most funeral homes are aware of these programs and will be able to assist you. If you want more information, go to:

### Massachusetts State Assistance

- **Department of Transitional Assistance Burial Unit**  
**Phone: 617-348-8420**
  - To be eligible for funeral and burial payment assistance, the total cost of the funeral, cremation, and burial cannot exceed \$3,500.
  - You may be eligible for up to \$1,100 of the cost.

To review eligibility requirements, ask your funeral director or visit:

<https://www.mass.gov/funeral-and-burial-payment-assistance>

### Federal Assistance

- **Social Security Administration**  
**Phone: 1-800-772-1213**
  - Survivor benefits vary; call to check eligibility.
- **Veterans Affairs**  
**Phone: 1-800-827-1000**
  - The deceased must have served in the U.S Military.
  - Survivor benefits vary; call to check eligibility.

In addition, there are additional funeral and burial assistance funds available throughout the Greater Boston area, including:

- **Special COVID Burial Fund Reimbursement Program**
- **Victims of Violent Crimes**
- **Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief (CICRF)**
- **The Lazarus Ministry Fund**

For more information regarding these funds or about controlling costs for funeral arrangements, you can call MGH social services at 617-726-2643 or download their resource packet at:

<https://www.massgeneral.org/assets/MGH/pdf/Social-Service/Funeral.pdf>

## VA Burial Benefits

**If your loved one was a veteran**, there are burial benefits available, including funeral assistance or a burial plot with a headstone at no charge. If you choose a funeral home outside of the VA network, some financial aid is also available. For more information on burial and survivor's benefits, call the Veterans Affairs Office at 1-800-698-2411.

### **Massachusetts National Cemetery Burial**

Connery Avenue  
Bourne, MA 02532  
**Phone:** 508-563-7113

- No charge for burial plots or headstones for eligible Veterans.
- Burial is available for spouses and any dependent children at no cost.

### **Massachusetts Veterans Memorial Cemetery**

111 Glenallen Street  
Winchendon, MA 01475  
**Phone:** 978-297-9501

AND

1390 Main Street  
Agawam, MA 01001  
**Phone:** 413-821-9500

- No charge for burial plots or headstones for eligible Veterans.
- Nominal fee for the burial of spouses and eligible dependents.

For more questions regarding more benefits and assistance, call the Veterans Affairs Office at 1-800-698-2411.

## When a Baby Passes On

The death of a baby can be deeply distressing for parents and loved ones involved. MGH has spiritual care services and social work services available to support you during this tender time. For support, ask your nurse or call the Office of Decedent Affairs at 617-643-7550.

### Creating Memories:

- If your baby passes away, the nursing staff will create a Memory Box containing:
  - Photos, footprints, and a lock of hair for a keepsake.
  - Please ask your nurse how to receive your Memory Box.

### Burial Options:

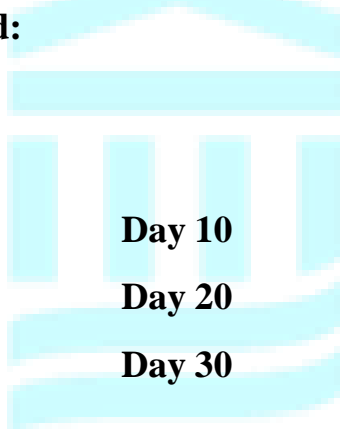
- There are **TWO** options under Massachusetts State Law for your baby's disposition:
  - **Option One:** The baby's family makes arrangements with a funeral home for burial or cremation.
  - **Option Two:** The baby's family asks MGH to take responsibility of the baby's remains. MGH arranges with a funeral home to have the remains buried in a recorded but unmarked common gravesite.

## **Valuables and Personal Belongings**

At the time of release, valuables will be signed out by funeral home (at their discretion).

MGH will no longer take responsibility for the items once leaving the facility. An exception is for the Medical Examiner and Casper Funeral Home which refuse to accept any patient belongings currently. These items will be retained by MGH.

**When a decedent's belongings are not taken at the time of release, it is policy that the belongings will be held for THIRTY (30) days. The decedent's Next of Kin (NOK) will be contacted:**



**If after 30-days, unclaimed belongings are not claimed, they will be discarded after 5-7 business days.**

## Death Certificates

A death certificate is an official **legal document** certifying that the decedent has died and can be used in probate court to prove the will and administer important legal and financial affairs pertaining to the decedent's estate.

### What You Need to Know:

- The death certificate will allow you to update important financial information associated with the decedent, such as closing out bank accounts, canceling credit cards, and contacting the life insurance agency.
- There are **two ways** you can obtain copies of the Death Certificate:
  - Your funeral director
  - Boston City Hall
- The funeral home will file the death certificate at Boston City Hall. The Certified Copy of the Death Certificate can be obtained online, by mail, or in person at Boston City Hall.

**Boston City Hall**  
Registry Death  
1 City Hall Square  
Room 213  
Boston, MA 02201-2006  
**Phone:** 617-635-4175

For more information, please visit:

<https://www.boston.gov/departments/registry/how-get-death-certificate>

# Autopsies and Autopsy Reports

## What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical post-mortem examination intended to establish the cause of death when a suspicious or unexpected death occurs. An autopsy can also confirm a known diagnosis or disease process in a way that advances our knowledge and contributes to the research.

## How to request an autopsy?

The HCP or legal next-of-kin will be given the opportunity to request or decline an autopsy once a patient has died.

Autopsies for MGH patients are free of charge to the family.

## What happens to the body after an autopsy?

After an autopsy is completed, MGH will call your designated funeral home to pick up the deceased for final arrangements.

- MGH does not assume responsibility for the burial/ cremation of deceased patients who have an autopsy.

## Requesting An Autopsy Report

The autopsy itself can usually be completed the same day or the next day from time of consent. The **final autopsy report** can take 60-90 business days or longer for complicated cases.

- To request the **autopsy report**, you must be listed as the **Executor of the patient's estate**, even if you are next-of-kin or listed as the HCP.
- Becoming the Executor of the patient's estate requires you to file with the Probate court *a Petition for Probate of Will and/or Appointment of Personal Representative* (MPC 160).
- Whether you **are** or **are not** listed in the will as Executor of the patient's estate, you must still file with the **Probate court**.
- To file, go to:
  - <https://www.mass.gov/guides/file-a-formal-probate-for-an-estate>
- After filing this process can take 60-90 days.

Once you are the Executor of the estate you must request the report from **MGH Medical Records at 617-726-2361**.

- To request online go to <https://www.massgeneralbrigham.org/patient-information/request-medical-records>
- Download and complete the MGH authorization form including signature and date.
- Mail or fax your request along with proof of being the executor of the estate to:
  - Release of Information  
122 Inner Belt Road, Room 240  
Somerville, MA 02143-4453  
Fax: 617-726-3661

## Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

If the deceased patient falls under the OCME jurisdiction, the hospital no longer has authority over their post-mortem care. The body will be transported to OCME at 720 Albany Street, Boston, MA, for examination.

Funeral arrangements must then be made through OCME.

### What you need to know:

- The OCME does not require permission to transport a patient to their facility or perform an autopsy.
- If the OCME accepts jurisdiction of the death they will complete the death certificate, *not* MGH.
- It is important to inquire what type of exam was performed at OCME which can be
  - Full internal/external exam
  - (Limited) External exam/Toxicology testing only
- **If you requested an autopsy at MGH** and your loved one was transported to OCME with a **limited** exam performed you can still opt to have them brought back to MGH for an full internal exam.
  - The autopsy itself is free **however** the *you must arrange and pay for the transportation of the deceased back to MGH by a funeral home of your choice.*

Information for requesting OCME autopsy reports is available through their website: <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/office-of-the-chief-medical-examiner>

Should you have any additional questions, please call the OCME at 617-267-6767.



## Counseling and Grief Support

To support families and loved ones of patients who have passed, Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) offers various grief support services, including spiritual care and counseling for patients and their families. To request these services, ask your nurse or contact the departments below.

- The **MGH Chaplain Service** supports all faiths and diverse spiritual needs 24 hours a day. If you would like spiritual care, you may also contact them directly at:

**Phone:** 617-726-2220

- **Social workers** provide counseling and assist with finding financial and social support for patients and their families. To contact a social worker, please call:

**Phone:** 617-726-2643

- **Bereavement Support Groups** are also available for people who have experienced the loss of a loved one. For more information, contact Carol McSheffrey LICSW via phone or email:

**Phone:** 617-724-5301

For additional resources or questions regarding grief support, please call the Office of Decedent Affairs at 617-643-7550.

# Recommended Reading For Grief Support

*These resources are for informational purposes only and do not constitute an official endorsement from MGH.*

## Websites

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
  - <https://afsp.org/>
- Bereavement Support
  - <https://www.massgeneral.org/medicine/palliative-care-and-geriatric-medicine/resources/bereavement-support>
- Living with Loss-Growth House Inc
  - <https://www.bereavementmag.com/>
- National Alliance for Children's Grief
  - <https://childrengrieve.org/>
- Remembering Our Babies
  - <https://www.october15th.com/>
- Grief Recovery Institute
  - <https://www.recover-from-grief.com/>
- Support After a Death by Overdose
  - <https://sadod.org/>

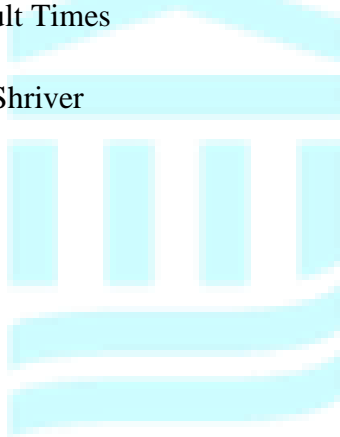
## Books

- *Advice on Dying* by Dalai Lama
- *Empty Arms: Coping with Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Infant Death* by Sherokee Ilse
- *Empty Arms: Hope and Support for Those Who Have Suffered a Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Tubal Pregnancy* by Pam Vredevelt
- *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping, and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One (Dealing with Grief and the Effects on Mental Health)* by Brook Noel & Pamela Blair
- *Learning to Fall* by Philip Simmons
- *Talking about Death* by Virginia Morris

- *What Dying People Want: Practical Wisdom for the End of Life* by David Kuhl, MD.
- *When You Know You're Dying* by James Miller
- *What We Wish Were True: Reflections of Nurturing Life and Facing Death* by Tallu Schuyler Quinn

### **Kids & Teens Coping with Death & Loss**

- *The Sad Dragon: A Dragon Book About Grief and Loss* by Steve Herman
  - A Cute Children's Story to Help Kids Understand the Loss of a Loved One, and How To Get Through Difficult Times
- *What's Heaven?* by Maria Shriver



## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: What does it mean to say that a person is dead?**

A: Death may be defined as the termination of life, the cessation of all vital phenomena without the capability of resuscitation, either in animals or plants. Localized death is always happening in all parts of the living body. Individual cells and elements are being shed and replaced by new ones; this process is essential to life.

To die means the essential functions of the brain, circulatory, and respiratory organs, and other systems have entirely stopped.

### **Q: Could death have been prevented?**

A: MGH's doctors, nurses, and staff made every effort to ensure the best quality of care for your loved ones during their time at the hospital. The present consensus, both scientific and religious, indicates that death can never be prevented.

### **Q: Could death have been delayed?**

A: Prolonging life, or improving the quality of life, is what science and medicine are working toward. Modern medicine has come a long way in curing disease and prolonging life from what would have killed a person 100 years ago, but there is still no cure for death.

### **Q: What does the medical community gain from doing an Autopsy?**

A: Autopsies are useful for diagnostic, education, quality improvement or research purposes. Autopsies also help with evaluating the effectiveness of treatments or procedures for the benefit of other patients, Mass General Brigham staff, and the practice of medicine elsewhere.

### **Q: What happens to the body after it is buried?**

A: This question has varying answers depending upon pre-burial procedures. The body will decompose eventually, but at different rates. If the body were embalmed before burial, decomposition would take longer than if the body was not embalmed. The body may also decompose slowly if the casket and vault were sealed and not exposed to as many of the earth's natural elements as a wooden casket that is not well protected. Once the body starts to decompose, the tissues break down in varying stages until all that is left is bone.

## Notes

