

IT IS THE JOB OF DETECTIVES AND INVESTIGATORS TO CONNECT THE PIECES OF A CRIME SCENE PUZZLE, BUT ONLY AFTER ALL HAVE BEEN GATHERED AND SORTED. IN MY LAST COLUMN, I TALKED ABOUT USING A CHECKLIST TO DOCUMENT WHAT YOU OBSERVE. EVERYTHING YOU SEE AT A CRIME SCENE IS POTENTIALLY A CRITICAL PIECE OF EVIDENCE – A CRITICAL PIECE OF THE PUZZLE.

The importance of documenting everything you observe at a death scene is crucial to eliminating questions during prosecution. I recommend the use of a checklist to keep track of the crime scene – what you observed and who was involved. Keep in mind that no matter how many pieces of the puzzle you gather and assemble, you may never have the face. The puzzle, however, may be the map that leads you to it.

I previously covered how to document the case information, scene security, and search warrant information. I also discussed the value of recording who is at the death scene and what role they fill. I talked about documenting some basic information about the scene and the weather. Now we'll look at adding to your checklist, details about where the body is found.

Coroner Notification and Body Removal

Keep track of how and when the coroner and any associated investigators and agencies are notified of the death. Record date and time each was called and by whom, as well as when they arrived. Before the coroner is allowed into the scene, make sure all evidence that can be contaminated by his presence is collected. This includes blood spatter, foot prints, tire tracks, and shell casings. Especially if there has been a significant lapse of time between when the scene was first secured and when the coroner arrived, make sure you share with him any pertinent information that may affect his investigation, such as the weather and temperature when you first arrived. Stand by the coroner and record any remarks relevant to the case. This may include cause of death by bullet wound, knife wound, ligature marks, or beating.

When the body is ready to be moved, continue to jot in your checklist, everything that happens. Record the name of the company notified to remove the body from the scene. Who called them and when? Who authorized the body to be removed from the scene? Who actually picked up the body? When did they arrive and depart? Answers to these questions begin the documentation of the chain of custody of the body.

Continue to record that chain of custody as you note whether or not the body bag was sealed and if so, how (tape, locking tag, or some other method). Catalog the body bag seal or tag number. Record where the body will be transported (funeral home, medical examiner's, etc.) and who made the decision. Was the body escorted? Note that by escorting the body, you will insure the chain of custody for

the body and any evidence recovered from the body. If there is an escort, note the name and department.

You can also use your checklist to document basic information of the deceased, including complete name, address, phone number, date of birth, and marital status, if this information is available at the time. If not it may become available at a later time. Upon your visual inspection of the body, jot down your observations such as age, race, sex, weight, height, hair color, eye color, facial hair, and the like. Who found the body? Document as much information as possible about him or her. Include full name, address, date of birth, and phone number. The person who finds the body will most likely leave his or her prints as well as other evidence at the scene. We need to document their actions at the scene. We need to be able to filter these out as the investigation continues. Record the date and time the body was found as well as anything else relevant.

Now turn your attention to the area where the victim was found. Categorize the area by the following: structure, water, vehicle, or open area.

Body Found in a Structure

Keeping in mind that the question of jurisdiction may arise; record as much information as possible about the location. Include the type of structure where the body was found. Is it an apartment, duplex, house, garage, outbuilding, or other? Write down a brief description. Record the full address and phone number. You may need to check the phone records. Describe the structure in terms of number of rooms and how they are laid out. Does the structure have a basement; full, partial, or none?

As you document the conditions of the surroundings, you will become more investigator than recorder. I have talked about your checklist providing a means to eliminate the questions while in court. You can also use your checklist to expand your thoughts as you begin to form theories about what may have taken place. Try to determine how a suspect may have entered the structure. What is the point of entry; what is the method of entry? Are the doors or windows open? Does it make sense that doors or windows would be open, given the weather?

Use the conditions of the surroundings to determine if a robbery had taken place. Does it appear like anything such as a television is missing? Is there dust where a TV may have been? Note the condition of the doors; open, closed, locked, or unlocked. Does the condition make sense? If the building has a garage, record that fact and whether or not the doors were open or not; locked or not. Take a look in the garage and document the condition. Is there an oil spill that should be noted? Perhaps the perpetrator parked in the garage while inside. Did he or his car leave any evidence? Collect it.

As you can see, the checklist can not only eliminate the questions but can help you anticipate the questions. Document the condition of the windows as you found them as well as what you observed. Are they open or closed? Broken?

The condition of the interior of the structure can furnish you with valuable evidence. Take into account the overall view of the interior. Can you determine the living habits of the victim? If the structure is in disarray, does that mean anything? Perhaps some level of clutter is the norm. If the place seems neat and orderly except for something small, like a toss pillow on the floor or a rug out of line, then document it. Remember, in forensics, little things become big things!

Turn your attention to anything electrical. Are the lights on or off? Combining that information with the time of day may yield a critical fact about when the crime took place. What about appliances? Document whether or not the washer or dryer is on. Is anything in either? Note the state of any televisions or radios. Even if they are not on, record the stations to which they are set. Your victim may be an 80 year old woman who watches nothing but CNN but the television is set to MTV. This is very likely a relevant piece of the puzzle.

Use your checklist to document whether a computer was in the structure. Most likely, this will be taken as evidence for processing, but while at the scene, before chain of custody is an issue, note the state of any internet connections and emails. If a telephone was found, record the number. Note whether you dialed *69 to determine the last call made. Record whether or not you find an answering machine. Is it on or off? Check the tape for messages. This may help with determining the time frame of the crime.

Remember, you record everything you see not only to describe the scene but to document that you actually looked for all these things. An investigator can easily become distracted, especially when lots of personnel are present. You want to make sure that if questioned about something in court, you have an answer. Again, eliminate the questions.

Record the state of the heater and air conditioner. What is the temperature inside the structure? Body decomposition can be affected by any of these factors. Note whether any animals are present. If not, is there evidence that the deceased had pets? Is a dog bowl sitting on the kitchen floor but no dog is seen? Is there any evidence that an animal had been taken? Record all of this.

Look around to see if you can determine when the death occurred. Is there any dated material present? Look for newspapers and receipts. Check the mail. Does it appear that there is several days' worth of mail in the box? Look for evidence of food preparation. Is there anything on the stove? A meal half eaten on the table? Is any alcohol present? All of these can help determine the time or possible date of the latest activities of the victim. Again, record everything you observe.

Now that you have recorded the conditions of the structure, focus on the body. Use the checklist to record the room and where within the room, the body is located. Visually observe the position of the body. Is it on its back, face down, right side, left side, sitting, or hanging? Note whether the body was diagrammed or not. How is the deceased clothed? Is there any jewelry? Does it appear that any jewelry has been stolen?

Your own observations of the condition of the body, as well as those of the coroner, should be recorded. How well preserved is the body? This can run the gamut from well preserved to decomposed to skeletal remains. Note any smell or flies present. Record the condition of the body as to lividity and rigor and color.

Indicate whether any blood was found and its location. Was anything tied to the body? Describe it. Are there any ligature marks? Is there evidence as to what caused them? Conclude your record of the condition of the body with anything else you observe that seems relevant.

My first column on using a death scene checklist can be found at www.forensicmag.com. In the next issue, we'll continue our discussion as we further explore how to document scenes when bodies are found in the water, in vehicles, and in open areas. Keep in mind the importance of documentation – it eliminates the questions, and helps a jury to convict only the guilty. More information on my death scene investigation checklist can be found at www.csigizmos.com.