

It's all in the report

Think of a crime scene like a bunch of puzzle pieces scattered and strewn about. It's your job to gather all the pieces and put them together. Problem is, the puzzle box is missing. You don't know what the completed puzzle looks like and you don't even know how many pieces there are. Everything you do at a crime scene, every piece of evidence you collect, and everything you document during the investigation is potentially a part of the puzzle.

As a crime scene investigator, you need to be as thorough as possible. Documentation is key. This is never more true than at a death scene. In this, the first of a continuing series on investigating a death scene, I look at documenting case information, civilians at the crime scene, and scene location, assignments, and conditions.

Good investigators can keep lots of details in their heads. Great investigators document the details. Why is documentation so important? Because you want all your evidence and all your testimony about that evidence to be admissible in court. You want to eliminate questions about that evidence. You can never be sure when or if a case will come to trial. It could be years later, after you've potentially investigated hundreds more crimes, and after your memory has faded.

I recommend using a checklist to document everything you can about the crime scene.

In addition to creating an archive of the scene itself, this sort of report is a record that you actually observed everything you have noted. For example, say you are at a crime scene and there is no blood. Unless you actually note in writing that you saw no blood, how does one know you even looked for it? Assume you will be asked in court about everything. Once again, do everything possible to eliminate the questions.

Keeping a checklist... common sense? You bet. It's your reminder to look at everything. It's insurance that even if you get distracted, you will go back and you'll be glad you opted for it once you're questioned about the crime scene.

As you work at a death scene, always do so with the assumption that the case will go to a jury trial. Collect and document any potential evidence. The relevance of it may not be obvious at the time, but may be crucial as the investigation progresses. The evidence must be uncompromised and your testimony will back it up. Remember, eliminate the questions.

Let's look at what types of things you should record when you initially arrive at a death scene. First, document the case information, including the basics like

department name and address, date, case number, the type of case you are working on (suicide, homicide, accidental, natural, or undetermined), and the full street address. When were you notified of the crime and by whom? Who authorized you to the scene? Note what time you arrived and who was in charge when you got there. Add to your record, the name and department of the first officer at the scene.

I recommend checking the scene security next. Note whether or not the scene has been secured. If it has, by what method (officers, barrier tape, vehicle, other)? A scene security log should be started when officers begin searching the scene and continue until the scene is released. Note whether or not a security log has been started and by whom. Document the same for an officer entry log.

Next, record any information about a search warrant, including if one is needed, and if so, who obtained it, and when (date and time). List the names of all county or district attorneys and judges involved with obtaining a search warrant. Did the prosecuting attorney show up at the scene? What time did he or she arrive and leave?

In addition to the officials, civilians may be present at the scene. These may include first responders, medical personnel, and family members. Record contact information including names, telephone numbers, companies, and relationship to victim.

Now, let's think about personnel at the scene. Smaller departments may have one person wearing many hats, while large jurisdictions can often afford more manpower at a crime scene. Document everyone and his or her department, including person in charge, recording person, evidence collector, and the officials diagramming, photographing, and videotaping the scene.

Depending on the complexity and nature of the scene, specialists may be brought in to help in the investigation. Additionally, technology, such as scene mapping programs, may be employed to document things. Remember to record what was done and by whom.

Is the weather a factor? You may not be sure, so record it. Note the scene temperature, both inside and out, the wind direction and speed, any precipitation, and condition of the sky.

We've covered the beginnings of a death scene checklist. In the next issue, we'll continue our discussion as we further explore examining a death scene. 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.