



STATE OF WEST VIRGINIA
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN RESOURCES
Bureau for Public Health
Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

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April 23, 2020

Memorandum

From: State of West Virginia – Office of the Chief Medical Examiner

To: Hospitals, Healthcare Facilities and Funeral Services Industry

Subject: Utilization of Body Bags for decedents during COVID-19 Pandemic

This information is being provided to facilities and entities which may have the occasion to utilize body bags for the proper preparation of a decedent for transportation to a funeral home or crematorium during their normal daily operations. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) has received information that some entities have decided to utilize two (2) body bags per decedent or “double bagging” due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The OCME does not suggest or recommend this practice as it is counterintuitive to the current understanding of the risks of transmission of the COVID-19 virus in a post-mortem situation. Currently, the available evidence indicates that the transmission of COVID-19 occurs primarily through the production of respiratory droplets by an individual who has been infected. In a post-mortem situation, respiration has ceased, eliminating the production of respiratory droplets. As such, the risk of transmission of the virus by the decedent through this method is nearly eliminated.

Concerns regarding the spread of the virus through physical contact with a decedent during preparation for transportation are best addressed through the proper utilization of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). There is currently no published scientific evidence of the virus being transmitted from a decedent to a person involved in the handling, transport, autopsy or embalming of the body. Best practices in the forensic pathology community currently include additional PPE protection when there is a procedure conducted which may produce aerosolization of the decedent’s blood, but such procedures are outside the scope of this memorandum.

There is currently evidence of a nationwide shortage of body bags which has negatively impacted the ability of manufacturers to keep up with the demand. This shortage may be different with each supplier, but it appears to be extensive. The practice of unnecessarily utilizing two body bags per decedent during the pandemic will only add to these supply chain issues. There are many entities that have mitigated their transmission concerns surrounding this issue through other creative non-traditional methods. One of the more cost-effective methods that has come to our attention is the utilization of a bed sheet or blanket wrapped around the chest and head of the decedent prior to placing the decedent into a single body bag.

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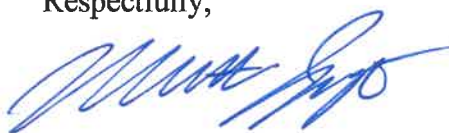
The OCME has extensive experience with the handling of decedents, averaging 24 cases daily across the state. Our staff and transportation vendors have been directed to follow CDC recommended universal precautions, specifically:

1. Utilize the proper standard PPE when handling a decedent.
2. Utilize a single, moisture and vapor impervious body bag per decedent.
3. Utilize a proper disinfectant spray to wipe down the exterior of the body bag after the decedent has been sealed within, out of an abundance of caution, as an extra protective measure.
4. Properly dispose of PPE upon completion.
5. Properly wash hands upon completion.

This internal guidance is based upon the available knowledge and understanding of COVID-19 transmission and the risks to our staff and those involved in the transportation of decedents into and out of our facility. The single body bag provides excellent protection when combined with the appropriate PPE. The OCME encourages any entity which has additional concerns to utilize creative, safe solutions that do not consume scarce resources or consumables such as the example listed above.

If you have any questions or need any additional information, please feel free to contact the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner at (304) 558-6920.

Respectfully,



Matt Izzo
Chief Administrator
State of West Virginia
Office of the Chief Medical Examiner