Handout 6-4

Dealing with
Medical Examiners/Coroners

The jurisdictions of medical examiners or coroners differ from state to state and even county to county.

In many cases, the Medical Examiner is a medical doctor who operates with a staff of physicians and investigators. Some states have county coroners who are not required to be physicians, but have a similar role to a medical examiner. You may encounter medical examiner's or coroner's staff at the accident site. In some states, that office may have jurisdiction for protecting the site and investigating the incident.

Autopsy reports (which include toxicology) are routine for the medical examiner/coroner. The final reports often take as long as 30 days for completion. In most states, an "unwitnessed" death will require autopsy. However, you must deal with the laws in the state where the investigation is being done. In some states, the request for autopsy results will have to be requested in writing.

Keep in mind, autopsy and toxicology reports are vital to fatality investigation.
It is essential that the team leader recommend that an autopsy is completed. Autopsy arrangements must be made immediately because once the body is released to the family; final burial/cremation arrangements will take place. A request for an autopsy must be coordinated with the victim's family.

Autopsy reports will be made a part of the investigative package.

Firefighter Autopsy Protocol

This protocol was developed by the U. S. Fire Administration for the purpose of providing medical examiners and pathologists with uniform recommended procedures for investigating the causes and contributing factors related to firefighter deaths.

While every attempt will be made to provide this protocol to the medical examiner at the same time the SAIT is dispatched, you as Team Leader should follow up with the medical examiner to ensure it was received and is being utilized.

NOTE: Family members are entitled to benefits under the U. S. Department of Justice, Public Safety Officer Benefits Program when "public safety officers found to have died as the direct and proximate result of a personal injury sustained in the line of duty." (28 CFR 32.1)
To acquire these benefits, claimants are required to demonstrate that the injury resulting in death was the direct result of activities performed in the line of duty (vs. personal health such as coronary artery disease).