

Coronial investigations – information for family and friends

The Coroners Court of Queensland (CCQ) independently investigates reportable deaths.

We understand this can be a distressing and overwhelming time for family members and friends. We extend our condolences to you for your loss.

We encourage you to keep this guide with you throughout the process.

We aim to complete investigations as quickly as possible, however the length of the investigation will depend on a number of variables including the complexity of the case.

Why does investigation occur?

The *Coroners Act 2003* (Coroners Act) requires some deaths to be reported to a Queensland coroner for investigation (reportable deaths).

The purpose of a coronial investigation is to establish facts such as:

- the identity of the person who died
- when and where they died
- how they died, and
- the medical cause of death.

The coroner does not assign blame or determine criminal or civil liability. They focus on:

- examining the circumstances leading up to the death
- any failures that contributed to the death
- whether the person's death could have been prevented

Under the Coroners Act, the coroner has authority to investigate and obtain information from any person or agency they consider can assist the investigation.

Types of reportable deaths include the following.

Violent or unnatural death

These deaths include:

- homicide
- transport incident (e.g., car, air, rail, marine)
- workplace fatality
- suspected suicide
- fall, drowning, exposure to the elements

- drug or alcohol toxicity.

These must be investigated even if there is a delay between the incident and the death if it is considered to have caused or contributed to the death.

Suspicious death

This is generally where:

- a homicide is suspected
- it is unclear whether others were involved in the death.

If criminal offence charges related to the death have been laid, the coronial investigation may be delayed until those proceedings are resolved.

Health care related death

A death is not automatically reportable to the coroner because it occurred in a health care setting. A death is health care related when:

- it is an unexpected outcome of health care
- it comes from a failure or delay to diagnose and/or treat appropriately.

Health care procedures can include dental, medical, surgical and diagnostic procedures, among others.

If you have concerns about the care provided to a deceased person but the care did not directly cause the death, you can contact the Office of the Health Ombudsman.

Death in care

The deaths of vulnerable people in specific care settings are reportable even if the person died from natural causes. This includes:

- people with disability
- people with mental illness
- children subject to child safety intervention.

In these cases, the investigation may lead to an inquest if the death raises concern about the care provided. More information can be found in the Deaths in Care factsheet: <https://www.coronerscourt.qld.gov.au/about-our-court/reportable-deaths>

Death in custody or during a police operation

A coronial inquest must be held for all deaths - even those from natural causes - if it occurred:

- while in police or correctional custody
- while in immigration detention
- while trying to escape from custody.

If a person dies during policing operations, such as by suicide while police are present, the coroner will determine if an inquest is required.

Death certificate not issued

If a cause of death certificate cannot be issued by a doctor, the death must be reported to us. If, on review, a doctor can identify a cause of death, we will determine if it is appropriate to issue a cause of death certificate.

Suspected death (missing persons)

A missing person report is typically made to police by family or friends. If police have reason to believe the person has died, they must report the suspected death to us for investigation.

Who is involved in the investigation?

Coroners Court of Queensland

We lead the investigation, working closely with our partner agencies, police and health, to establish the facts of the death.

Some deaths reported to us are initially reviewed by a Coronial Registrar, such as when:

- deaths from an apparent natural cause are reported by police
- medical professionals seek advice on whether a death is reportable.

In some cases, these may progress to a coroner to investigate further.

Queensland Police Service

Police attend the scene of most violent and unnatural deaths. Attending police officers will:

- provide a preliminary report to the coroner
- help establish the identity of the deceased person if necessary
- arrange for initial transport of the deceased person to a mortuary
- provide information about return of property

Police Officers from the Queensland Police Coronial Support Unit assist and support the coroner.

Forensic Pathology and Coronial Services (FPaCS)

Forensic Pathologists, forensic nurses and counsellors and other specialists work closely with us and police officers to provide coronial services.

FPaCS provide a range of medical examinations to help determine the cause of death, including:

- non-invasive preliminary examinations
 - external examination of the body
 - a review of medical records
 - the collection of blood and urine samples
 - whole body CT scan
- More invasive examination including partial or full internal autopsy which may result in organ retention for specialist examination.
The coroner must consider any family objections before ordering an extensive examination or organ retention.
- toxicology
- histology
- forensic dentistry
- neuropathology

Depending on the type of medical examination ordered by the coroner, the forensic pathologist's report can take several months to complete.

At all times the deceased person is treated with respect and dignity.

Coronial Family Services (CFS)

CFS support families affected by a death under coronial investigation. They may reach out to you in the initial stages of a coronial investigation.

Our contact with the family

The term 'family member' has a specific meaning in the Coroners Act.

While the coroner can allow more than one family member to be nominated as a contact during the investigation process, it is preferable the family nominate one person as our primary contact, who then shares updates with other family members.

The family can appoint a lawyer to act for them and/or be our primary contact during the investigation.

If a family dispute arises, there is a specified order of seniority outlined in the Coroners Act for family members.

Recognition by the coroner of an individual as a family member does not mean formal legal recognition for any other purpose, such as an estate matter.

To make sure we can keep you updated on progress, it is important to keep us informed of any change to your contact details.

First Nations families

We are committed to fostering and engaging in culturally sensitive and appropriate practices. Families are invited to share any cultural or kinship considerations early in the investigation, to ensure their needs can be considered.

We strive to ensure that information is provided to families in a way that is culturally safe and respectful.

The release of information

The coroner decides on whether coronial information is released and to whom.

Requests for unpublished coronial documents must be submitted to CCQ in writing (proof of identity may be required).

More information can be found at www.coronerscourt.qld.gov.au/resources/accessing-coronial-documents

Can I make funeral arrangements?

The family can start making funeral arrangements while the investigation takes place.

Your chosen funeral director will work with us and the mortuary about the funeral process. The deceased person will be released to the funeral director when the preliminary examination is complete, and the coroner has accepted the cause of death.

Funeral Assistance Scheme

Through our Funeral Assistance Scheme, we can make funeral arrangements for persons who have died in Queensland and have no known family member willing or able to meet funeral costs.

There are eligibility requirements to qualify for this scheme. In some cases, the cost of funeral services provided under the scheme can be recovered from funds in the deceased person's estate.

More information can be found on our website www.coronerscourt.qld.gov.au/for-families/funeral-assistance-scheme.

For help applying, contact your local Magistrates Court. <https://www.courts.qld.gov.au/contacts>

Obtaining a death certificate

Once the coroner accepts the medical cause of death, the Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages (RBDM) is notified.

To obtain a copy of the death certificate, you can:

- contact RBDM directly www.qld.gov.au/rbdm
- arrange one through your funeral director.

If you were issued an interim death certificate while the cause of death was unknown, you can return this to RBDM and obtain the updated version free of charge.

Will there be a coronial inquest?

In most cases, investigations into reportable deaths are finalised without an inquest when the coroner's written findings are issued. This is a formal document about the death. These findings may be published on the court's website if publication is in the public interest.

If the coroner wants to publish non-inquest findings, the family will be consulted. When considering publishing the findings the coroner may de-identify the name of the deceased person.

In some circumstances, a coroner may determine an inquest is required. An inquest is a court hearing.

It is not a trial and does not:

- involve a jury
- determine guilt or civil liability.

The coroner will hold an inquest if:

- one is mandated by law
- it is determined to be in the public interest, which may occur if:
 - there is significant doubt about the cause and circumstances of the death
 - recommendations connected to the death may help prevent future deaths
 - recommendations connected to the death uncover issues affecting public health and safety or the administration of justice.

Inquests are usually open to the public and any interested person can attend, with all details published on our website.

After an inquest has concluded:

- the coroner's findings are published on our website
- any recommendations are sent to the relevant entity to consider implementing.

A family member who disagrees with the coroner's decision not to hold an inquest has a right to request one by completing an application outlining why it is in the public interest one be held.

If the coroner declines the request, an application may be made to the state coroner to order an inquest. If the state coroner declines to hold an

inquest, an application can be made to the District Court for an inquest to be held.

Legal assistance

Families do not need to be legally represented when a death is being investigated by CCQ.

If you would like to obtain legal advice, the following services can be contacted:

Legal Aid Queensland

For information and referral for legal advice, and advice on whether you qualify for free legal aid.

Phone: 1300 65 11 88

Website: www.legalaid.qld.gov.au

Queensland Law Society

For names of legal firms in your area that specialise in inquests and coronial law.

Phone: 1300 367 757

Website: www.qls.com.au

Queensland Coronial Legal Service

Provides free legal advice to bereaved family members about any aspect of the coronial process and related issues.

Phone: (07) 3214 6333

Website: <https://caxton.org.au/how-we-can-help/queensland-coronial-legal-service/>

Community Legal Centres Queensland

Find your nearest community legal centre

Phone: (07) 3392 0092

Website: www.communitylegalqld.org.au/

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service

Culturally sensitive legal services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland.

Phone: 1800 012 255 (free call)

Email: coronial@atsils.org.au.

Website: <https://atsils.org.au/>

Contacts and support services

Coroners Court of Queensland

GPO Box 1649 Brisbane QLD 4001
Phone: (07) 3738 7050 (*main registry in Brisbane*)
Outside Brisbane: 1300 304 605 (local call cost)
Email: CoronersCourt@justice.qld.gov.au
Website: www.coronerscourt.qld.gov.au

Queensland Police Coronial Support Unit (CSU)

Co-located at most of our registries, the CSU coordinates coronial processes and liaises with forensic pathologists and mortuary staff.

Phone: (07) 3292 5901
Email: QPSOfficeStateCoroner@police.qld.gov.au

Forensic Pathology and Coronial Services

Phone: 1800 000 377 (free call)
Email: Forensics@health.qld.gov.au

Coronial Family Services

Phone: (07) 3096 2794
1800 449 171 (free call)
Email: FSS.Counsellors@health.qld.gov.au

Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages

PO Box 15188 City East QLD 4002
Phone: 13 74 68
Email: bdm-mail@justice.qld.gov.au
Website: www.qld.gov.au/rbdm

Victim Assist Queensland

Providing information, advice support services and financial assistance to victims of crime.

Phone: 1300 546 587
Website: <https://www.qld.gov.au/law/crime-and-police/victim-assist-queensland>

The Office of the Health Ombudsman

The agency to take complaints/concerns about Queensland health services and/or providers.

Phone: 133 646
Website: www.oho.qld.gov.au

Consultative Committee for work-related fatalities and serious incidents

Providing injured workers and families affected by a workplace death with information and support.

Phone: 0417 910 130
Email: OHSConsultativeCommittee@oir.qld.gov.au
Website: www.worksafe.qld.gov.au/about-us/consultative-committee

Queensland Homicide Victim Support Group

Offering 24 hour / 7 days support, advocacy, and information for those affected by a homicide.

Phone: 1800 774 744
Website: www.qhvsq.org.au/

Compassionate Friends Queensland

Offering friendship and grief education to families following the death of a child.

Phone: 1300 064 068
Email: admin@tcfqld.org.au
Website: <https://tcfq.org.au/qld/>

Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Support Association (SOSBSA)

Supporting those bereaved by suicide and those at risk of suicide.

Phone: 1300 659 467
Website: www.sosbsa.org.au

Standby – Support After Suicide

Supporting those bereaved or affected by suicide.

Phone: 1300 727 247
For the deaf and hard of hearing: SMS 0428 842 041 (6am-10pm 7 days)
Website: www.standbysupport.com.au

Suicide Call Back Service

Providing free 24 hour / 7 days phone and online counselling to people affected by suicide.

Phone: 1300 659 467
Website: www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/

Roses in the Ocean

Providing a Peer CARE Companion warmline – a call back service where you can speak with a trained volunteer who has also been bereaved through suicide.

Phone: callback service 1800 77 7337
Website: <https://rosesintheocean.com.au/>

Lifeline Australia

Providing free 24 hour / 7 days phone crisis support.

Phone: 13 11 14
Website: www.lifeline.org.au/

Kids Helpline

Providing free and confidential 24 hour / 7 days online and phone counselling for young people aged 5 to 25.

Phone: 1800 55 1800
Website: www.kidshelpline.com.au/

Mensline

Providing free telephone and online counselling and support for Australian men.

Phone: 1300 78 99 78
Website: www.mensline.org.au/

First Nations Family Support Services

13 YARN

Providing a free 24 hour / 7 days culturally safe support line for mob who are feeling overwhelmed or having difficulty coping.

Phone: 13 92 76
Website: www.13yarn.org.au/

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Wellbeing Services

Providing free and confidential support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to improve social, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, and families safely care for and protect their children.

Phone: 1300 117 095
Website: www.familywellbeingqld.org.au/

Thirrili

Thirrili Indigenous Postvention Response Service supports communities, families, and individuals experiencing trauma in the aftermath of suicide. Their culturally safe support system respects local cultural protocols and practices, promoting self-determination in bereavement and healing. Thirrili operates a suicide support phone service 24 hour 7 days a week. Phone: 1800 805 801

Website: <https://thirrili.com.au/>

Mob Link

Staffed by a deadly team of intake officers, nurses, doctors, Indigenous outreach workers and social workers, Mob Link supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Southeast Queensland to access same-day care or support to connect to health and social services.

Phone: 1800 254 354 7am to 8pm, 365 days
Website: <https://www.iuih.org.au/our-services/mob-link/>