Body Found

Finding a dead body can be a shocking and emotionally difficult experience for a caller. Although a death may result from natural causes or an accident, it may also involve violence or other suspicious circumstances. This course prepares emergency telecommunicators to gather essential information from callers reporting a body, recognize indicators of suspicious circumstances, describe the condition and stages of decomposition, estimate an approximate time of death, preserve potential crime-scene information, and use effective techniques to calm callers who are overwhelmed by the discovery.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, learners will be able to:

1. Distinguish between death resulting from typical medical conditions and death involving suspicious circumstances.
2. Gather pertinent information from callers to help prepare first responders.
3. Identify signs that may indicate a potential crime scene or foul play.
4. Describe the stages of decomposition and use observable indicators to estimate an approximate time of death.
5. Apply communication techniques to calm callers who are shaken or hysterical after discovering a body.

Module 1: A Caller Reports They Found a Body

This module introduces the telecommunicator's responsibilities when a caller reports finding a person who is unresponsive or appears to be dead. Learners examine how to distinguish among a sleeping, unconscious, or deceased person; assess signs of life when appropriate; determine when CPR or unconscious-person protocols should be used; and gather essential information about the victim, scene, and person who discovered the body.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Distinguish among a sleeping, unconscious, and deceased person based on information provided by the caller.
2. Guide a willing caller in checking for signs of life when no obvious signs of death are present.
3. Determine when CPR instructions, the Unconscious Fainting protocol, or the Person-Body Found protocol is appropriate.
4. Gather accurate location, timing, victim, clothing, and scene information needed by responders.
5. Explain why the person who discovered the body should remain available to responders and provide valid contact information.

Content/Activities

- Assessing whether the person is sleeping, unconscious, or deceased
- Checking for signs of life
- CPR instructions when the patient is alive but not breathing
- Unconscious Fainting protocol
- Person-Body Found protocol
- Gathering call information
- Determining the exact scene location
- Using GPS coordinates when an address is unknown
- Estimating how long the body may have been at the scene
- Evaluating body position
- Describing clothing and identifying possible signs of injury or assault
- Determining whether the caller knows the victim
- Identifying who found the body
- Knowledge Check

Module 2: Suspicious Circumstances

A body-found incident should be treated as potentially suspicious until trained responders evaluate the scene. This module focuses on recognizing indicators of foul play while maintaining caller safety and protecting potential evidence. Learners examine suspicious persons and vehicles, unusual environmental conditions, signs of struggle, trauma, rigor mortis, and the presence of weapons.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Identify circumstances that may suggest a death resulted from foul play rather than natural causes.
2. Ask targeted questions about suspicious people, vehicles, environmental hazards, and unusual activity near the scene.
3. Recognize physical and environmental indicators of a potential crime scene.
4. Explain how the presence and location of weapons may affect the response and investigation.
5. Apply caller-safety and evidence-preservation principles while gathering information about suspicious circumstances.

Content/Activities

- Treating a body-found scene as suspicious until evaluated
- Protecting the caller from potential danger
- Protecting evidence from disturbance or contamination
- Suspicious persons or vehicles leaving the scene
- Clothing inappropriate for weather conditions
- Foreign substances, odors, or hazardous chemicals
- Signs of a potential crime scene
- Severe trauma and blood at the scene
- Blue or pale body coloring
- Dark purple discoloration in lower portions of the body
- Rigor mortis
- Signs that a struggle may have occurred
- The presence of weapons
- Recognizing objects other than guns or knives as potential weapons
- Knowledge Check

Module 3: The Condition of the Body

The condition of a body can provide responders with important information about how long the person may have been deceased and how the scene should be managed. This module introduces the stages of decomposition and the observable characteristics associated with each stage. Learners examine fresh, bloat, active decay, advanced decay, and dry stages and relate caller observations to approximate postmortem timeframes.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Identify observable physical changes associated with decomposition.
2. Describe the characteristics of the fresh, bloat, active decay, advanced decay, and dry stages.
3. Associate each stage of decomposition with an approximate postmortem timeframe.
4. Ask callers appropriate questions about body condition, fluids, odors, discoloration, rigidity, insects, and skeletal remains.
5. Use caller observations to provide responders with a broad estimate of how long the person may have been deceased.

Content/Activities

- The importance of describing the condition of the body
- Signs of decomposition
- Rigor mortis
- Fluid leaking from the mouth
- Bloat Stage: Days 4–10
- Swelling and inflation of the body
- Fluid leakage and rupture
- Foaming at the mouth
- Strong odor of decay
- Maggot activity
- Tight-fitting clothing caused by swelling
- Active Decay Stage: Days 5–11
- Loss of accumulated gases and fluids
- Deflation and tissue loss
- Continued odor and fluid leakage

- Advanced Decay Stage: Days 10–25
- Drying of the body
- Skeletal remains with skin, hair, and cartilage present
- Dry Stage: Days 25+
- Skeletal remains with no soft tissue
- Dissipation of odor
- Definition and role of maggots in decomposition
- Knowledge Check

Module 4: Calming a Shaken Caller

Callers who discover a body may become extremely upset, especially when they know the victim or encounter significant trauma at the scene. This module prepares telecommunicators to recognize when a caller has reached the hysteria threshold and use effective communication strategies to regain control of the call. Learners practice techniques including a steady and decisive tone, moving the caller away from the body, repetitive persistence, use of the caller's name, and the Three C's of courtesy, confidence, and concern.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define the hysteria threshold and explain how it can interfere with effective emergency communication.
2. Recognize verbal and behavioral indicators that a caller is too distraught to answer questions effectively.
3. Apply effective techniques for lowering a caller's emotional intensity without telling the caller to "calm down."
4. Demonstrate repetitive persistence and other communication techniques to gain the caller's attention and establish control of the call.
5. Apply courtesy, confidence, and concern while gathering information from a distressed caller.

Content/Activities

- Emotional reactions associated with discovering a body
- The telecommunicator's responsibility to gain control of the call
- The Hysteria Threshold
- Why telling a caller to "calm down" can increase anxiety or aggression
- Using a steady but decisive tone
- Moving the caller out of the line of sight of the body
- Encouraging the caller to take a deep breath
- Using the caller's name
- Repeating strong words to regain attention
- Repetitive Persistence
- Helpful repetitive-persistence statements
- Recognizing that callers may become hysterical again later in the call

- The Three C's: Courtesy, Confidence, and Concern
- Helpful vs. unhelpful caller responses activity
- Helpful responses: moving away from the body, taking a deep breath, using the caller's name, and repeating strong words
- Unhelpful responses: yelling, hanging up, or telling the caller to call back when calm
- Knowledge Check

Module 5: Course Review and Application

This concluding module reinforces the major responsibilities of a telecommunicator handling a body-found call. Learners integrate information-gathering, scene-safety, suspicious-circumstance recognition, decomposition assessment, and caller-management techniques to support an appropriate emergency response.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Summarize the essential information that should be gathered during a body-found call.
2. Differentiate routine indicators of death and decomposition from circumstances suggesting possible foul play.
3. Apply decomposition indicators to estimate an approximate time since death.
4. Select appropriate actions for protecting callers and preserving potential evidence at a body-found scene.
5. Integrate effective caller-calming techniques with accurate information gathering and responder notification.

Content/Activities

- Review of essential body-found call information
- Review of suspicious circumstances and potential crime-scene indicators
- Review of the stages of decomposition
- Review of caller-calming techniques
- Scenario-based application of course concepts
- Final Knowledge Check
- Course Conclusion

Course Completion Criteria

To successfully complete this course and earn continuing education hours, learners must achieve a minimum score of 75%. The quiz must be completed within 30 minutes.

- CE hours awarded: 1
- Certificate duration: 12 Months

Technical Requirements

- Desktop, laptop, or mobile device
- Speakers or headphones
- High-speed Internet access
- A current web browser