



State Child Fatality Review Team for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The Paige Victoria Perry Act Report 2009

**Henry M. Nields, MD, PhD, Chair
State Child Fatality Review Team
Chief Medical Examiner**

Introduction

The State Child Fatality Review Team (“SCFRT”) established pursuant to M.G.L. c. 38, § 2A is statutorily charged with reviewing incidences of child fatalities for the purpose of decreasing the incidence of preventable child fatalities by developing an understanding of the causes and incidence of child fatalities. Pursuant to Chapter 336 of the Acts of 2008 (known as the Paige Victoria Perry Act) the SCFRT was directed to conduct a study of the training and protocols related to sudden, unexplained deaths of children under the age of three. In conducting this study, the Act requested that the team examine the feasibility of adopting statewide training and protocols, including those developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”), for first responders and investigators, including emergency medical systems personnel, municipal police, state police and medical examiners. In response the SCFRT formed a subcommittee to review and make a recommendation regarding the Act. The SCFRT respectfully submits the following analysis for establishing said statewide protocols.

CDC Training

The CDC has published a systematic training program for the professional infant death investigation specialist.¹ The CDC defines sudden unexplained infant death (“SUID”) as the sudden and unexpected death of an infant due to natural or unnatural causes. Sudden infant death syndrome (“SIDS”) is one of several causes of SUID, however, SIDS, unlike the other SUID causes, is a diagnosis of exclusion. The CDC training program emphasizes gathering as much information as possible from the parents or caregivers who were with the infant to assist in distinguishing among a natural death, an accidental death or a homicide.

The CDC training materials include background information on SUID, guides for conducting case interviews, scene investigation protocols and pre- and post-autopsy reporting guidelines. The training materials also include sample investigation forms and a list of the twenty-five most critical pieces of information identified by forensic pathologists nationally in determining cause and manner of infant death. The SCFRT recommends that the training materials include a standardized data collection process and that first responders and death scene investigators be trained on collecting this data. The CDC twenty-five most critical questions should be used as a model for the standardized data collection.

The CDC training model is based on the train the trainer concept. In 2006, the CDC began to conduct training in five regionally based areas throughout the nation. According to the CDC website, the training academies produced more than 250 trainers, including medical examiners,

¹ Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Investigation, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

coroners, law enforcement officers, child advocates, college faculty members and medicolegal death scene investigators. The individuals trained by the CDC are then expected to conduct additional training in their respective states. The CDC estimates that 14,000 individuals have been trained on these materials. Topics covered in the training include how to:

- Complete the SUIDI Reporting Form.
- Interview grieving families in a culturally appropriate manner.
- Conduct death scene reenactments or recreations (e.g., how was the infant discovered, and what was the sleeping environment.)
- Use Web-based electronic reporting system to allow rapid communication from the death scene investigator to the forensic pathologist.

Feasibility of statewide training program

Curriculum:

In order to implement standardized statewide training protocols there must first be a curriculum that is accepted as a standardized statewide practice and accepted by all groups of first responders, including investigators, emergency medical services (“EMS”) personnel, municipal police, state police and medical examiners. Presently, law enforcement officials including local police receive training on this topic in the municipal training academy. In addition, firefighters receive training in the fire academy. State police personnel that are responsible for death scene investigation are also trained regionally by county. The SCFRT recommends review of current training standards to identify areas of uniformity with CDC standards. After said review, a standardized statewide curriculum could be adopted that is either identical or similar to the CDC training materials.

The SCFRT recognizes that there is a distinction as to the depth of training required for death scene investigator and first responders. Death scene investigators approach the scene from a different perspective and are seeking different types of information. First responders are not necessarily investigating the scene but, their information is critical for assisting to determine the cause and manner of death. While training curricula will have similar content for all groups, the process of death investigation should be in more depth and consistent with the CDC guidelines for investigative personnel. The SCFRT recommends encouraging coordinated training with both law enforcement and non-law enforcement first responders, including EMS personnel.

Establishment of the curriculum is the critical first step of the training process; requirements pertaining to periodic recertification are also important. The SCFRT recommends amending M.G.L. c. 38 to include a section that requires periodic retraining of death scene investigators and first responders responsible for SUID investigations, subject to appropriation. EMS personnel are required by the Department of Public Health (“DPH”) to complete recertification

requirements every two years. SCFRT recommends recertification training every two years in death scene investigation.

Training:

After a curriculum is finalized, the next step would be to establish regional trainers as well as training locations. The SCFRT recommends that the District Attorneys Offices receive funding for the purpose of establishing said training program within their offices. The District Attorneys are the most logical nexus among the various groups of first responders, however the SCFRT acknowledges that implementation of this training program is not without cost. Each District Attorneys office would need at least one certified trainer. Funds would also need to be expended to allow for the administrative costs to establish such training, including technology, supplies and training facility cost, if any. SCFRT also recommends that the District Attorneys receive funding to develop a record keeping system to track and identify when training has been completed or requires recertification.

The above recommendation is made based on an in person training model. Alternatively, an online learning module could be developed to train first responders and death scene investigators; however, this would also be subject to appropriation, start up costs and maintenance.

Sensitivity towards families

The CDC training materials provide guidelines to follow when interviewing families affected by infant death investigations. Any standard curriculum should include guidelines for approaching grieving families and childcare providers in a professional and sensitive manner as in the CDC curriculum.

The Act also refers to requiring training protocols to include notification to families of available community resources and support groups as well as coordination with the Massachusetts Center for SIDS at Boston Medical Center.

The Massachusetts Center for SIDS (“Center”) is the statewide central resource for families and caregivers who experience the sudden unexpected death of an infant or young child (0-3 years). Funded by DPH, the Center provides a range of bereavement support services, including grief condolence packets, telephone counseling, and bereavement home visits for a year following the child’s death, parent support groups, and parent to parent supportive contacts and referral to other community resources as appropriate. The Center is also responsible for conducting training programs on SUID/SIDS for community professionals who encounter bereaved families who experience such deaths. In addition, the Center collects and reports data on these deaths to DPH.

The Center notifies families of the bereavement support groups offered by the program, by area hospitals statewide and by other programs dealing with infant and child loss, such as hospice and palliative care programs, Compassionate Friends and other groups. The Center includes an updated list of these support groups in the grief condolence packets sent to families.

The SCFRT acknowledges the important public service provided by the Center and recommends that notification of the Center and its services are included in the training curriculum for death scene investigators and first responders.

Conclusion

The SCFRT recognizes the vital importance of effective, standardized SUID investigations. We have determined that a consistent, statewide SUID training program for all first responders and death scene investigators is a critical component to our team's mission of decreasing childhood death and injury. Necessary action steps to achieve our goal include a legislative mandate to require training and periodic updates for all first responders, development and delivery of a standardized training curriculum, and funding to support these endeavors.

Therefore, the SCFRT recommends the following actions:

- Development of a standardized training curriculum modeled on the CDC training by incorporating a review of existing training curriculum for the Municipal and State Police, Fire, and EMT personnel.
- Amending M.G.L. c. 38 to include a section that requires periodic retraining of death scene investigators and first responders responsible for SUID investigations, subject to appropriation.
- Require recertification training every two years.
- Conduct coordinated training between law enforcement and non-law enforcement first responders.
- Development of standardized data collection procedures and incorporation of said procedures in the training curriculum.
- Designate the District Attorneys offices as the centralized training location and provide funding to these offices in order to deliver the trainings as well as maintain centralized records of training participants.
- Ensure that the training curriculum includes information on how to approach grieving families and childcare providers in a professional and sensitive manner as well as on resources available to families affected by SUID, including information regarding the Massachusetts Center for SIDS.

