

**SANTA BARBARA COUNTY  
SHERIFF'S OFFICE  
FORENSICS UNIT  
FINGERPRINT SECTION**

**PROCESSING OF DECEASED INDIVIDUALS**

### **1.0 Scope**

The Fingerprint Unit assists law enforcement agencies in the post mortem printing of deceased persons for identification purposes and for possible future fingerprint comparisons.

### **2.0 Limitations/Preliminary Concerns**

The Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office Coroner has authority over deceased persons. A good working relationship has developed between the Forensic Unit and the Coroner's Bureau through the mutual investigation of death scenes. Communication between the Coroner's Bureau and the Forensics Unit is essential to this working relationship. Any Forensics Unit interactions with the deceased should be first discussed with Coroner's personnel. Coroner's Bureau personnel have on occasion requested fingerprint restoration techniques on badly decomposed or mummified remains. Forensics personnel should be willing and able to provide services that will assist in the identification of remains for the Coroner's Bureau.

For an individual whose identity is suspected and known standards are available, only a single recording of an area of friction ridge skin sufficient to identify is required. The collection of a single fingerprint is also allowable if there is an urgent need to identify a deceased person while still at the crime scene and collecting more would compromise potential evidence. If known standards are not available, or for an individual whose identity is unknown, a ten-print recording shall be taken if the condition of the fingers allow.

A full set of finger, joint, and palm impressions shall be taken of deceased crime victims for elimination purposes, provided that the conditions of the hands are such that these impressions may be taken.

### **3.0 Materials and Equipment**

#### **A. Equipment**

1. Personal Protective Equipment
  - a. Lab coat or Tyvex suit
  - b. Goggles or face shield
  - c. Particle or odor mask
  - d. Latex or nitrile gloves
2. Inked Printing Supplies
  - a. Printer's ink
  - b. Ink roller (brayer)
  - c. Recording surface
3. Powder and Lifting Supplies

- a. Fingerprint powder
  - b. Brush
  - c. Lifting tape
  - d. Casting material
  - e. Adhesive lifter sheets
4. Photographic or digital imaging equipment

## **4.0 Procedures**

### **4.1 Chemical/Safety**

1. Safety concerns include:
  - a. Biological hazards associated with the handling of human remains,
  - b. Chemical hazards associated with tissue preservation (formalin, formaldehyde, etc.), these are not typically encountered by Sheriff's personnel, but keep them in mind.
2. Decontaminate surfaces and equipment after use.

### **4.2 Inking and printing procedures**

A. Confer with Coroner's personnel prior to processing the deceased person.

B. The procedure below describes the method used when the human remains are in good condition:

1. Gently clean fingers as necessary and thoroughly dry the fingers.
2. If the fingers are stiff and flexed, better exposure of the finger pads can usually be obtained by forcefully flexing the wrist toward the forearm.
3. Ink the finger on an ink pad or apply ink with an ink roller.
4. Roll the finger onto a recording surface.
5. If there is blood or other body fluids on the print card, allow it to dry, then place it in a protective cover and affix a biohazard warning label.

### **4.3 Dusting and lifting procedures**

A. Confer with Coroner's personnel prior to processing the deceased person.

B. The procedure below describes the method on all but the most decomposed subjects:

1. Gently clean hands as necessary and thoroughly dry the fingers.
2. Lightly apply fingerprint powder to the finger with a brush.
3. Place lifting tape or adhesive lifter over the finger. If the skin is wrinkled or uneven, use an object to place the tape into areas of the finger in order to obtain a usable impression.
4. Lift the tape or adhesive from the finger. This process can usually be repeated several times; however, if the skin begins to crack or peel, consider using another technique or processing another finger.

Note: Casting material may be used in lieu of lift tape and may be used prior to or after dusting. The cast may then be used to make impressions.

5. Place the lifted impression on a clear piece of plastic.
6. Flip the plastic over and mark it or secure it to the appropriate box on a fingerprint card. By flipping the plastic over, the print will assume the same position as an inked print on the fingerprint card.
7. Repeat the above process (#2-#6) for the palm surfaces of the hand. The full sheets of adhesive lifter are large enough to cover the entire area or it may be cut into pieces to allow easier application.
8. Properly mark the fingerprint card and any other evidence associated with the case.
9. If there is blood or other body fluids on the print card, allow it to dry, then place it in a protective cover and affix a biohazard warning label.

#### **4.4 Skin removal procedures**

A. Coordinate the removal and printing of this skin with Coroner's Bureau personnel. Sometimes bodies decompose in a manner that the skin readily slips from fingers and hands. Although this creates problems for some methods of printing, it can be an advantage when other methods are utilized.

B. When the skin can be removed from the fingers:

1. Place the skin over a gloved finger and then ink and roll or powder and lift to obtain an impression, or
2. Squeeze the skin between two glass slides and photograph.

#### **4.5 Photography procedures**

A. Photography is an unobtrusive method by which to record friction ridge skin.

B. When photographing deceased fingers and palms, have an assistant do the photography to avoid unnecessary steps to decontaminate the equipment.

#### **5.0 Receipt of Fingerprint Comparison Requests from the Coroner's Bureau**

An SBSO Coroner's Bureau Request for Fingerprint Comparison Form on an unidentified person will be required before comparisons to records on file are reported. A written report of the results of the comparison will be provided to the SBSO Coroner's Bureau. If an identification is made and the case has time sensitivity, a verbal notification of the identity of a deceased person may be given, after a second qualified fingerprint examiner has independently verified the identification.

#### **6.0 Searching the Automated Fingerprint Database**

- A. A deceased person may be entered as a manual ten-print search in the Cal DOJ database. The manual ten-print search will search the criminal and registrant databases.

- B. If there is not a match, the print will be entered as a latent inquiry and the databases will be searched again. The different search criteria may produce a match (i.e.: WIN search). Save the file in case an FBI IAFIS search is needed.
- C. The unknown deceased person will then be entered into FBI IAFIS for a federal search. One or more fingers may be entered for searching, depending on the quality of the fingerprints.

## 7.0 Examination of Friction Ridges and Conclusions

Refer to LP005, "Friction Ridge Examination," for comparison techniques and reporting instructions.

## 8.0 References

Masters, N. and Blume, P., An Overview of Laboratory Safety, *Journal of Forensic Identification*, Vol. 44, #1, 1994.

U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *The Science of Fingerprints*.

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