

Security's role in morgue operations: needed— a foolproof plan

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If handling the remains of dead patients is a responsibility of your security department, or you are being pressured to take on the role because of budget cuts, the need to anticipate and plan for complications which may arise is critical, the author points out.

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Is it a role of healthcare security officers to handle the remains of deceased patients (i.e. transporting to the morgue, facilitating the transfer of the remains to mortuary services)? Often the answer to this question will depend on your size of facility, geographic location, and your security operation in general. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions above, because it really comes down to the determination of several factors.

When an organization establishes this service under the direction of the security department, it can be due to factors such as a lack of other staff to do the service. It can also be due to the old expression, “this is the way we have always done it!” I have seen this service handled in many different settings, and just as many different results.

A ROLE FOR CONTRACT OR IN-HOUSE?

When it comes to determining whether or not this service is provided by security, does it matter if the department is proprietary or contracted out? There is no general protocol for either way; however, upon reviewing several operations it would seem that security departments that are contracted services are more likely to have this service under their control. Why is that? That's a discussion for another day, because there is no absolute answer or requirement to do so. However, contract security services seem to offer a more variety of services in addition to typical protection services, and that can be the deciding factor for an organization to select a contract company. The organization may feel that they are getting more for their dollar and can save in other areas. The opinions on that issue can be, and usually are, all over the board and not normally agreed on by the different entities. So let's look at the service of security handling the remains of the deceased regardless of what type of department you have.

ARE THE PROPER PROTOCOLS IN PLACE?

If your organization requires that security will transport, handle, and log in and out the remains, does your department have the proper protocols in place to do so? Have you considered what the process is, and if there are any vulnerabilities in the process? If you think that mistakes cannot be made, are you certain? There have been documented cases in which the wrong remains were transferred to morticians, and families have been devastated as a result of this mistake. One case in particular, the remains were mixed up and the wrong remains were cremated. As a result, one family never had a proper funeral service as a result of the error.

Another issue can be how will security officers can respond to high priority calls if they have human remains on the morgue transport cart? I have seen where security was transporting remains when a high-priority security call was overhead paged. The officers cannot leave the remains in the hallway or elevator to respond, so what happens at the scene of the

security incident if no officers respond promptly? What is your plan in the event that this happens in your organization? Do you want your officers moving remains or protecting staff, patients, and property at that point? If your department provides this service, certainly you have thought about what you are giving up to do so, right?

WHEN AND HOW TO RESIST SUCH AN ASSIGNMENT

In order to provide a service such as this, along with other more traditional security services, something has to give unless you have the luxury of excess staff (if that is the case you are the exception to the rule). I think that when you consider taking on this assignment, or are negotiating to pass it to someone else, just consider what it is you are trying to accomplish. If your calls for service are growing, and your staff is getting stretched thin like most everywhere else, you may need to

focus on security duties. More and more hospitals are requiring that security staff have a 24/7 presence in the emergency department, yet they are not adding additional staff. If your department handles the morgue duties as mentioned above, and now you are being asked to be in the ER 24/7, what is your priority going to be? Many hospitals are cutting staff, including security staff, so fighting to make changes in what your department is doing today, to a more security orientated department, you will face challenges and push-back. It will take some effort, and a good solid plan and facts to support your goal, but it can be done.

On the other hand, if you are performing the morgue duties now or being asked to take them on due to budget cuts in other areas, insure that you have a fool-proof program, policy, and procedure in place, or your organization can make the mistakes that other hospitals have made.