



The National Association of Medical Examiners®

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April 9, 2026

NAME Religious Exemption 2026

A religious objection to an autopsy is a legal and ethical issue that arises when a deceased person's family or next of kin believe an autopsy violates their religious beliefs. Several religions have specific prohibitions against performance of an autopsy. These include Judaism, Islam, Rastafarianism, and Haudenosaunee (Longhouse) among others. Different jurisdictions have specific laws and policies regarding what a coroner/medical examiner/forensic pathologist is legally allowed to do in these circumstances. These laws and policies sit squarely at the intersection of public health law, death investigation authority, and religious freedom protections.

Courts generally permit an autopsy when death involves:

- Homicide investigation
- Suspected child abuse
- Public health threats
- Unexplained deaths in custody
- Drug deaths requiring toxicology

Even in jurisdictions that recognize religious objections to autopsy under law, autopsies may often be ordered if the government can show a compelling public interest, and an autopsy is the least restrictive procedure to determine the cause and manner of death. Consideration is increasingly being given to less-invasive procedures in well-resourced offices, to include CT scans, MRI, limited autopsy, laparoscopic sampling, needle toxicology, and rapid burial release.

The National Association of Medical Examiners (NAME) encourages its members to develop a policy and procedure within their offices that addresses what will happen in instances where the coroner/medical examiner/forensic pathologist would like to perform an autopsy and the next of kin, for religious reasons or otherwise, would prefer an autopsy not be performed.

This policy should be in keeping with relevant laws and should involve communicating to the next of kin what will happen if an autopsy is not performed (e.g. that the cause and/or manner of death may be certified as Undetermined). This policy should address specific protocols to be followed in cases of homicidal violence, unexpected/unexplained infant deaths, suspected child abuse, or if there is a threat to public health where an autopsy is essential to determine the cause of death.

Jurisdictions should consider creating a form for next of kin to sign with language that clearly references any relevant laws, holds the office harmless, and specifically states that the cause and/or manner of death may be certified as Undetermined if the family or next of kin prohibits the coroner/medical examiner/forensic pathologist from conducting a full death investigation, including an autopsy.

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NAME 2026 President