

A free step-by-step guide for families and communities facing a contested death ruling

Before Any Ruling Is Made

1

Request an independent second autopsy

Ask the funeral home to delay embalming and formally request a private forensic pathologist review the body in addition to the state medical examiner. Get this in writing to the coroner's office.

2

Put a federal review request in writing

Send a written letter to your U.S. Attorney's Office and local FBI field office asking them to open or join the investigation. Request written confirmation of receipt and a case or reference number.

3

Preserve the scene in your own records

Take your own photos/video if you're allowed near the scene, and write down the names and badge numbers of every officer, coroner staff, and first responder you encounter, with dates and times.

Building Your Case File

1

Keep a written timeline

Log every call, visit, and conversation with police, the coroner, and the media, including dates, names, and what was said. This becomes critical if the case stalls or the ruling is disputed later.

2

Contact a civil rights legal organization early

Reach out to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, JULIAN, or a local civil rights attorney before a ruling is finalized, not after. Early legal involvement can help secure evidence preservation.

3**Ask specifically for a homicide investigation to run in parallel**

A suicide classification does not have to close the door on a homicide inquiry if you request, in writing, that both be pursued simultaneously.

If a Ruling Comes Back You Dispute**1****You can request a reclassification review**

Coroners and medical examiners can and do amend rulings when new evidence surfaces. Submit your independent autopsy findings and any new witness statements formally, in writing, to request review.

2**Escalate to state and federal oversight**

If local authorities decline to reconsider, your state Attorney General's office and the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division can both be asked to review a closed local case.