

BEREAVEMENT GUIDE 2026
Boston Medical Center



Dear Family and Friends,

We are deeply sorry for your loss. At Boston Medical Center, we recognize that grief is personal and experienced differently by each individual and family. Please know that you are not alone, and that our community is here to support you with care, respect, and compassion during this difficult time.

Boston Medical Center serves a diverse community and strives to respect each family's values, beliefs, and needs. This guide is intended to provide information and resources that may be helpful in the days ahead. As questions arise or needs change, BMC remains a trusted source of care, guidance, and support as you move forward.

Identifying and Notifying Next of Kin

When a patient passes away at BMC, identifying and notifying their loved ones is a responsibility we take very seriously. Our Decedent Affairs Office and Care Management Social Work team work closely together to ensure that every reasonable effort is made to reach a patient's next of kin or legally authorized decision-maker in a timely and respectful manner.

This process involves a careful review of available medical records and prior documentation, as well as collaboration across hospital departments and, when appropriate, with community or healthcare partners who may have known the patient.

These efforts are carried out thoughtfully and with great care, recognizing the sensitivity of the moment and the importance of honoring the patient and their family. While much of this work happens behind the scenes, please know it is guided by compassion, diligence, and a deep commitment to ensuring families are informed and supported.

What You Need to Do

We know that discussions about funerary care for your loved one can be incredibly difficult. As you navigate the decisions at this time, we hope this information will help you feel empowered to make decisions that honor the dead as they would have wished.

For questions regarding laws and processes surrounding disposition in Massachusetts, please visit the [relevant Mass.gov page](#).

Step 1: Call the funeral home.

- Coordinate with BMC Decedent Affairs.
- Visit your loved one at BMC or the funeral home.

Step 2: Decent Affairs will coordinate with the funeral home.

- Contact those who need to know about your loved one's death.
- Gather personal information about your loved one for the next steps in the process.

Step 3: Call the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner directly if necessary.

- Get your loved one's personal belongings and valuables from BMC or the mortuary.
- Obtain a death certificate.

Step 4: Keep a list of any questions you would like to ask in the days ahead.

- Review our frequently asked questions to learn more.

Step 1: Call the funeral home.

Contact a funeral home to make arrangements for your loved one. The funeral home will be very active and helpful in guiding you through the process in the days and weeks to come.

Note: When choosing a funeral home, you can call any funeral home and they (according to the FTC) will have to state their itemized price list if you request a general price list, or GPL. This makes it easier to compare homes. Additionally, many funeral homes emphasize their “packages.” It can be helpful to know that the FTC consumer resources emphasize that it is your right to choose only the services you want.

Decedent Affairs

The Decedent Affairs Office (DAO) serves families as a liaison between the medical staff, funeral homes, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, as needed. The DAO is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you have any questions about paperwork, forms, funeral homes, autopsies, or the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, please call the DAO at 617.638.5788.

The DAO helps families understand the paperwork associated with a death and explains and secures permission for the completion of an autopsy, if requested.

When you call the DAO, please have the following information available:

- Your deceased loved one’s name
- The location of their death (building, room #)
- Your relationship to the deceased (e.g. spouse, parent, sibling, health care proxy)
- The deceased loved one’s date of birth
- Any questions you have

If you need to contact the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, please call 617.267.6767, ext. 100 or go to their office at 720 Albany Street, Boston, MA 02118. You do not have to go through BMC to talk to the medical examiner.

Fetal and Pediatric Death

In the case of a fetal or pediatric death, Boston Medical Center (BMC) provides compassionate care and guidance to families. Families work closely with the Decedent Affairs Office (DAO) and their care team to ensure that all necessary documentation is completed, and legal requirements are met.

For pediatric deaths, families are supported by a pediatric social worker and a child life specialist. The child life specialist helps families explain death and dying in ways that are appropriate to the child’s developmental level, supporting siblings and young family members through this difficult time. BMC staff are available to answer questions, provide emotional support, and guide families through next steps with sensitivity and respect.

A supplemental guide provides more detailed steps for this process that your social worker and child life specialist will review with you.

Visitation

When your loved one passes away at BMC, your family and doctors will be notified and you will be asked if you would like to come to the hospital to see your loved one. We will make every effort to honor your request for visitation but please note that we may need to transport your loved one to the hospital mortuary prior to this.

Before coming to the hospital, you should call Decedent Affairs to learn about any immediate next steps that may be needed: 617.638.5788.

Step 2: Decent Affairs will coordinate with the funeral home.

The funeral home will reach out to Decedent Affairs once you've contacted them and will coordinate with BMC to have your loved one taken into the funeral home's care. If you're unsure at any point about what you should do, it is always best to call first. Please contact Decedent Affairs at 617.638.5788 with any questions.

We encourage families to visit their deceased loved one at the funeral home.

Here is a check list of things that may be helpful to remember:

- ✓ Contact other family members, close friends, clergy, the deceased's employer, family, employer, and the children's school.
- ✓ Have family and close friends help you make and answer phone calls.
- ✓ Gather personal information regarding the deceased to take to the funeral home.
- ✓ Contact life insurance companies, social security, creditors, credit card companies, the bank, and your attorney.

For a more detailed list of information to take with you to the funeral home, contact the Decedent Affairs Office at 617.638.5788.

Step 3: Call the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner directly if necessary.

If your loved one was referred to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, you can call them directly at 617.267.6767, ext. 100.

Valuables & Personal Belongings

We understand how important your loved one's belongings are to you. BMC takes steps to keep items safe during a patient's stay and to return them to families when possible.

There are two types of personal property:

1. **Personal effects:** Items such as clothing, dentures, glasses, hearing aids, and assistive devices
2. **Valuables:** Items such as jewelry, cash, wallets, cell phones, laptops, and other high-value personal items.

How Belongings Are Handled

- Valuables are inventoried when a patient is admitted. They are placed in a secure location in the Admitting Office, which requires two keys to open, like a safe deposit box. A valuables voucher is given to the patient and recorded in the patient's medical record.
- Personal effects are usually kept with the patient or stored in a labeled belongings bag on the unit. These items are tracked on a belongings checklist that also becomes part of the patient's medical record.
- In most cases, your loved one's belongings will be sent with them to the funeral home you've made arrangements with
- In the case of your loved one being accepted by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, belongings will remain in the mortuary.

Please note: In some cases, clothing or personal items may need to be discarded if they are too soiled or unsafe to clean.

Retrieving Belongings After a Death

If your loved one passes away, their belongings will either be:

- Brought to the mortuary with them, if they are personal effects such as clothing or glasses.
- Secured in the valuables safe, if they are high-value items.

To Collect Valuables

- Contact the BMC Public Safety Office at 617.414.4444.
- Bring a photo ID and the valuables voucher (if you have it).
- Sign the release form so items can be returned to you.
- For personal effects that were sent to the mortuary, staff from the morgue or Decedent Affairs will coordinate with you to return them.

Lost & Found

Sometimes items become separated from a patient's belongings during their stay. If you believe something is missing:

- **Check with the care team:** Speak with the nurse or staff on your loved one's unit. They can check the room, belongings bag, and storage areas.
- **Contact Public Safety:** Call 617.414.4444. Items found in the hospital are kept in a secure location until claimed.

- **Act soon:** Items are only held for a limited time. Unclaimed items may be donated, discarded, or handled according to Massachusetts law.

Before calling about missing items:

- Be ready to describe the item in detail.
- Provide proof of ownership, if possible (such as a receipt or photo).
- Bring a photo ID to pick up the item in person.

We know that retrieving belongings during a time of loss can feel overwhelming. Our team will make every effort to return your loved one's possessions to you and to treat them with care and respect.

In case of any questions, contact Public Safety: 617.414.4444.

Obtaining a Death Certificate in Massachusetts

A death certificate is a legal document completed when someone has died. It is prepared collaboratively by the certifying physician, the hospital, and the funeral home.

- **Physician's responsibilities:** The physician certifies the cause of death and records the deceased's full name, date and time of death, and their own name and medical license number.
- **Funeral home responsibilities:** The funeral home provides additional details, including the deceased's address, education, occupation, Social Security number, and the arrangements for final disposition (burial, cremation, or other).

Once completed and filed with **Boston City Hall**, the death certificate is considered a **certified copy of the death certificate**. Certified copies are the official documents typically required for legal, financial, and administrative purposes, such as settling estates, claiming life insurance, or notifying government agencies.

How to Get a Certified Death Certificate in Boston

- **Online:** [Boston City Government Death Certificate Information](#)
- **By phone:** 617.635.4175
- **In person:** Boston City Hall, Suite 213 (Monday–Friday, 9 am – 4 pm)
- **By mail:** Boston City Hall, Suite 213, 1 City Hall Plaza, Boston, MA 02201

Cost: The fee for a certified copy varies depending on the method of delivery. Contact Boston City Hall for the most current pricing.

For children or infants: The process of getting a death certificate is generally the same for children and infants. The certificate will include additional details relevant to pediatric deaths, such as gestational age in the case of fetal or neonatal loss.

Additional support: If you need a formal letter documenting a death for any reason, the Decedent Affairs Office can help. Call them at 617.638.5788.

Tips for Families

- Request multiple certified copies at once, as they are often needed for legal, financial, and insurance matters.
- Keep the copies in a safe place, as replacements may require additional fees and processing time.
- If there are questions or discrepancies on the death certificate, contact the funeral home or the Decedent Affairs Office promptly to correct them.

Step 4: Keep a list of any questions you would like to ask in the days ahead.

NOTES

Frequently Asked Questions

Below, you can find answers to questions commonly asked about when a loved one is near the end of their life or has recently died.

Grief and Mourning

What is grief?

Grief is one's emotional reaction to the loss of someone or something meaningful to you. A meaningful loss may include a person, animal, place, a way of life, or good health.

Grieving is the process of emotional adjustment a person goes through after experiencing a loss. Grieving a loved one who has passed is also known as bereavement.

What is mourning?

The expression of deep sorrow for someone who has passed away is known as mourning. Mourning is also used to describe the cultural behaviors in which loved ones of the person

who has died participate, or are expected to participate, in, such as wearing black clothes or not cooking for a certain length of time.

Support and Resources

What is palliative care?

Palliative care is specialized medical care for people with serious illness. Palliative care is not hospice and can start at any stage of illness. Palliative care is holistic care that incorporates the person's spiritual, emotional, and psychosocial needs, as well as their loved ones. It focuses on relieving symptoms of pain and other physical symptoms, to improve the patient and family's quality of life.

Palliative care is often used with other medical treatments and is provided by an interdisciplinary team that includes physicians, nurse practitioners, social workers, chaplains, and other supportive areas.

What is hospice?

Hospice is a philosophy of care that provides comfort and relief of pain and other symptoms for patients with a terminal illness, with a prognosis of six months or less as determined by the patient's primary care provider and /or specialists who care for the patient.

Hospice focuses on helping patients and their families live the best quality of life that they can, spend quality time together, and manage the patients' symptoms. Hospice also provides emotional, spiritual, and psychosocial support to patients and their families. Hospice services can be provided in the home, nursing facility, hospital, or in a designated hospice house.

Medicare Part A, Medicaid, and most private insurance plans cover hospice care. However, it is always best to speak with your loved one's physician or care team to discuss further.

How do I find a support group?

If you are searching for a support group to attend after experiencing a loss, speak directly with your physician or social worker to get information about possible local resources and support groups in your area.

Keep in mind that some support groups are specific to a certain type of loss (such as the death of a child), while others may be more generalized to different types of grief— it's important to consider what may feel best for you.

Funerals

When my loved one is dying, how do I make arrangements?

If your loved one is dying and is a patient at Boston Medical Center, you can ask for help with this process from the social worker or case manager on the inpatient unit where your loved one is located. You can also begin contacting funeral homes who will speak with you about funeral arrangements and suggest the next steps that you should take.

If your loved one is at home with hospice or in another facility, you can ask the professionals working with your loved one for assistance with preparation for a funeral or suitable memorial.

How much does a funeral cost?

Funeral costs vary widely. Many families turn to a funeral home when planning a funeral. If you have not chosen a funeral home ahead of time, the [Massachusetts Funeral Directors' Association](#) can give you information on funeral homes in your area. They can be reached at 781.335.2031. A friend, family member or a member of the clergy may also provide you with a reference to a local funeral home.

Families interested in offsetting costs may seek out local memorial societies, which are membership groups that can help with planning and support, and may offer low-cost alternatives. You can also ask any funeral home whether they offer “sliding-scale” services for those with financial limitations. Some insurance companies also assist with funds toward funerals and burials. Please call your loved one's insurance provider directly to see if this is a possibility.

Making Medical Decisions

What is an advanced care directive?

An advanced care directive involves designating a health care proxy and determining a patient or family's "code status choice" as it reflects that patient's care goals and ultimate goals of care. In short, it lays out a person's wishes if they can't make medical decisions for themselves and tells the care team who should make decisions in that case.

Ideally, an advanced care directive is created before a patient needs intensive medical care so that their wishes regarding end-of-life decisions, autonomy, and resuscitation methods can be honored.

What is a health care proxy?

A health care proxy is an individual (often a family member or close friend) who the patient designates as their surrogate medical decision maker. A health care proxy should have had previous discussions with the patient or know the patient well enough to represent the patient's wishes.

The health care proxy is activated when the patient is deemed to be unable to make their own medical decisions. This can be in cases where the patient is too sick or their providers are concerned that the patient lacks capacity to make informed medical decisions. The

best decisions a health care proxy can make are the ones that best reflect what the patient would choose for themselves if they were able to do so.

Important Contacts

Admitting Office - 617.414.4128

For records and documentation

Animal Rescue League (Boston) - 617.426.9170 x604

For care of your loved one's pets

BMC Hospital Operator - 617.638.8000

For assistance with official hospital policy regarding decedents

Case Management Social Work - 617.414.5445

For logistical support, bereavement support, connection to safety-net services, and post-death planning

Decedent Affairs Office - 617.638.5788

For questions related to the disposition of your loved one's body

Internal Revenue Service (IRS) - 1.800.829.1040

To file the final income tax return, pay any outstanding taxes, or for questions regarding taxes

Office of the Chief Medical Examiner - 617.267.6767

For information regarding death certificates and body release policies if your loved one has been referred to their office

Patient Advocacy - 617.414.4970

To address any concerns of grievances and for assistance with post-death logistics and documentation

Public Safety - 617.414.4444

For questions related to claiming your loved one's belongings from the hospital

Registry of Motor Vehicles - 857.368.8000

To cancel the driver's license, return license plates, and transfer vehicle ownership

Social Security Administration - 1.800.772.1213

To stop benefit payment, prevent fraud, and secure potential survivor benefits

Spiritual Care - 617.638.6850

For support in the aftermath of death

Department of Transitional Assistance - 617.348.8420

If a family member died and there are no resources to pay the funeral home, you can apply for payment assistance for funeral and burial costs through the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA).

[Funeral Consumers Alliance of Eastern Massachusetts](#) - 617.859.7990

(serving Eastern and Central Massachusetts)

For resources regarding funeral planning and decision making

Counseling and Grief Support

Our experiences of grief are shaped by our cultures, spirituality, and relationships with the deceased. BMC offers a variety of spiritual and counseling support for families who have experienced loss. The Spiritual Care service offers 24-hour interfaith care by request for patients and families. Our Social Work Department is also available to offer grief support. Please request services from your nurse, and you will be seen as soon as possible.

The chapel is located on the 2nd floor of the Menino Building and is open 24/7. Note that between the hours of 7 p.m. and 6 p.m., the Chapel is only accessible with employee badge access.

We have compiled suggested resources to support your process. Additional resources can also be found on our webpage on BMC.org.

Recommended Reading & Support Resources

Books

- **On Grief and Grieving** by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross & David Kessler
A compassionate guide through the stages of grief and learning to find meaning.
- **Living When a Loved One Has Died** by Earl A. Grollman
- **Gone From My Sight, The Dying Experience** by Barbara Karnes, RN
- **I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping, and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One** by Brook Noel & Pamela Blair, PhD
- **Understanding Your Grief** by Alan D. Wolfelt
- **Bearing the Unbearable** by Joanne Cacciatore

Websites

- **[SAMHSA – Coping with Bereavement & Grief](#)**: Defines different types of grief and helps explain how to find real support

- [**APA's Culturally Informed Trauma & Grief Recovery Toolkit:**](#) Offers videos and handouts designed for diverse cultural backgrounds and access needs
[**HealGrief.org**](#)
- [**Center for Loss & Life Transition**](#)
- [**Hope Health:**](#) Offers virtual support groups to those in Massachusetts and Rhode Island who've endured a loss within the last two years