

Accessing Public Use Death Data Files for Healthcare Delivery System Improvement

1. Where do I go to begin the process of accessing death data files?

The Health Information and Research Section (HIRS) of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) is responsible for vital statistics data. HIRS maintains the Death Data Files [webpage](#) with descriptions of several types of files and links to additional information. Following the Purchasing Files [link](#) will take you to Vital Statistics Data and a link to download the Public Use application.

2. What information does the application ask for?

As required by [Section 102230](#) of the California Health and Safety Code, the application includes a data use agreement and a Notary Public form. It also specifies that you must attach a signed statement, drafted on your organization’s letterhead, regarding your intended use of the data. Using the data within your organization to improve healthcare delivery is acceptable. You must not use the data for research, and you cannot share the files beyond your organization.

3. What information is available?

The Public Use Death data files include all deaths in California for a given time frame. As stated within the application, the files contain nine information items:

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|----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Last Name of Decedent | 4. Sex of Decedent | 7. Place of Death |
| 2. First Name of Decedent | 5. Date of Birth | 8. Date of Death |
| 3. Middle Name of Decedent | 6. Place of Birth | 9. Father’s Last Name |

For 2014 and 2015 the files include two additional fields that offer details about DEATH IN HOSPITAL and DEATH OUT OF HOSPITAL. For prior years, you can request these fields, which include the following information:

DEATH IN HOSPITAL	DEATH OUT OF HOSPITAL
I = IP (Inpatient) E = ER/OP (Emergency Room/Outpatient) D = DOA (Dead on Arrival)	D = Decedent's Home H = Hospice Facility N = Nursing Home/Long Term Care Facility O = Other

Finally, you can request the PLACE OF DEATH fields (street address, city, county) and DEATH FACILITY NAME.

The available fields and file layout may be different from year to year.

The CDPH master files contain additional fields that may be of interest to you, e.g., cause of death, decedent’s residence, race, and education, but these are not available via public use request.

4. What time frames are available?

The application form allows you to request data for any previous calendar years back to 1905.

In your letter, you may also request more frequent delivery of data, e.g., quarterly or monthly. In order to receive these regular data deliveries, you must enter into a contract with CDPH. Contracts are for a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 5 years. If you are requesting both 2016 data and ongoing monthly delivery, for instance, you should request “2016 (annual file) and 1/1/2017 – forward (monthly files).”

5. What are the costs?

The costs are modest. If you are requesting an Annual file, there is no cost. If you are requesting files at any other frequency, such as monthly, the cost will be \$10 x the frequency. If you are requesting a weekly file, the cost will be \$520. These fees may change over time.

6. How quickly will CDPH respond to my application?

CDPH will respond as soon as possible, given departmental workload. The goal is to respond within 10 days with a cost estimate and invoice, though at times backlog or understaffing will result in a longer interval.

7. How do I get a copy of the required contract for regular deliveries?

CDPH will send you the contract after receiving your application.

8. How much time elapses between the ending of a time frame and delivery of the data?

Delivery usually occurs within a month or two of the most recent time frame. If you are requesting a monthly file, you will receive the file for the prior month by the end of the following month.

9. How are the files delivered?

This depends on the size of the file. Annual files are typically small and are sent to the requestor via secure email. For larger files, a CD will be sent via FedEx. The CDs are encrypted so an email is sent out with the password and the FedEx tracking number.

10. What else should be in my letter?

In addition to statements about your intended use and requests for the additional fields mentioned above, you should include a brief description of your data security measures.

11. Is there anything else I should know about the data?

The basic demographic fields should allow you to get acceptable matches with your delivery system’s population files for quality improvement purposes. You cannot use these data for research, nor should you attempt to use the data in actual healthcare delivery workflows, e.g., outreach to decedents’ families.