



**SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY  
2011-12**

**Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office**

# **SOLANO COUNTY SHERIFF-CORONER'S OFFICE**

2011-12 Solano County Grand Jury

[One member of the Grand Jury abstained from participation in this report.]

## **I. SUMMARY**

The 2011-12 Solano County Grand Jury elected to conduct an inquiry into the performance of the Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office. Penal Code §925 gives the Grand Jury the authority to inquire into the needs and performance of all county officers and offices.

The Solano County Coroner's Office was merged into the Sheriff's Office in 1999. Since the merger, no in-depth inquiry of the Coroner's Office by the Grand Jury has been performed. The 2011-12 Solano County Grand Jury found the overall operations of the Coroner's Office to be efficient and effective with a few exceptions.

Concerns with facility security, records storage and the use of an outdated department manual, have been identified. Also, problems with timely access to funding needed for professional services were discovered. The identified concerns are addressed in the Findings and Recommendations portion of this report.

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

The Coroner's Office is located at 520 Clay Street, Fairfield. The Coroner's Office was merged into the Solano County Sheriff's Office in 1999. Since that time the office has undergone continuous change.

The duties of the Coroner are outlined in California Government Code §§27490-27512, 27460-27473, and 27520-27521. The Solano County Coroner's Office performs autopsies and investigations to determine the manner and cause of deaths within the County that are violent, sudden, unusual, or where the deceased had not been seen by a doctor in the last 20 days.

The Coroner's staff consists of:

- 1 Lieutenant (Chief Deputy Coroner)
- 1 Sergeant
- 4 Deputy Sheriffs (Coroner Investigators)
- 1 Forensic Pathologist
- 1 Forensic Technician
- 1 Administrative Assistant
- 6 Disaster Relief Volunteers

The Coroner's Office budget for fiscal year 2011-12 is \$1,505,696. The Solano County Coroner's Office investigates approximately 1,300 deaths annually, of which 300 typically

require an autopsy. The Coroner's Office also investigates deaths at the state prisons located in Solano County. The County is reimbursed by the State of California for all services performed in these cases.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

The Grand Jury performed the following:

- Toured the Coroner's facility on September 8, 2011
- Interviewed the Sheriff-Coroner, Chief Deputy Coroner, a Coroner's investigator, a forensic pathologist, and a forensic technician
- Attended an autopsy on October 17, 2011
- Obtained and reviewed copies of Coroner's reports, autopsy reports, and personal property reports
- Obtained and reviewed the Coroner's Procedural Manual
- Obtained and reviewed a copy of the Coroner's Office budget for fiscal year 2011-12
- Obtained and reviewed a second quarter *PC 4700 Claims For Reimbursement From the State of California*
- Sent letters of inquiry to Solano County law enforcement agencies requesting comments regarding the Solano County Coroner's Office performance
- Sent letters of inquiry to surrounding counties' coroner's offices requesting specific information regarding their procedures
- Reviewed all correspondence returned to the Grand Jury regarding the Solano County Coroner's Office

### **IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS**

The Coroner's facility is located on the bottom floor of the County Justice Building directly under the Main Jail at 520 Clay Street, Fairfield. The Coroner's Office does not have an exterior alarm system. There are reports, evidence, decedents (and their property) in the facility that could be compromised without a security system.

Coroner reports are secured in a locked office which only two employees can access via a door key lock. The Grand Jury observed that security is not adequate. Coroner's reports are stored in plastic storage containers. The report filing system was organized; however, the Grand Jury was concerned with the storage containers in use. Fire or water could damage or destroy these extremely sensitive, irreplaceable, and historical documents.

The Coroner's Office is staffed from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. seven days a week. During the hours of 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., Coroner duties are performed by an on-call investigator. The "on-call" position rotates between the four investigators. They receive compensation for being "on-call", and paid overtime if actually called out. An investigator will respond to any death that will involve an autopsy.

Patrol deputies respond to a reportable death that will not involve an autopsy. Patrol deputies initiate a Coroner's report, and can consult with the on-call investigator if that expertise is required. This scheduling alignment has allowed the Sheriff to staff the Coroner's Office with one less full time position, (Salary and benefits in excess of \$100,000). In fiscal year 2010-2011, the Sheriff spent \$14,662 on overtime and on-call pay, a savings of at least \$85,000.

Since the merger of the Sheriff-Coroner's Office, every Deputy Sheriff is also a Deputy Coroner. Newly hired Deputy Sheriffs receive two weeks of training in the Coroner's Office to become familiar with Coroner's procedures.

A Coroner investigator responds to the death scene. When transportation of the deceased to the coroner's office is required, the task is performed by "John Morris Removal Service," a private company based in Sacramento. Prior to 2008, all autopsies were performed by another private company, "Forensic Medical Group." In 2008, as part of the continuous change, the Sheriff terminated this contract and Solano County hired its own Forensic Pathologist. Toxicology testing is contracted to a private laboratory, "Central Valley Toxicology" in Clovis, California.

The Grand Jury's tour of the Coroner's Office on September 8, 2011 revealed the office to be clean, well-organized, and spacious. There is adequate space for all employees to perform their duties. The morgue is well equipped and extremely clean. There is sufficient space to conduct multiple autopsies and allow law enforcement personnel to witness the process.

The autopsy room had California Occupational Safety & Health Administration (CAL-OSHA) signage for handling of bio-hazards. A shower and eyewash station is adjacent to the autopsy room in case of exposure to bio-hazards. Exhaust fans with filters are activated during the autopsy process. There is a refrigerator and freezer with capacity to store 32 bodies.

The Coroner's budget allocation for professional consultants is \$5,600. The Grand Jury learned that the budget allocation was insufficient and the process to secure funding was time consuming, laborious, and bureaucratic. The information is purportedly in conflict with Sheriff-Coroner's Office policy. It is a one-step process to obtain necessary funds and the allocation has never been fully exhausted.

The Coroner's Procedural Manual was last updated in 2004. The eight-year-old manual does not contain current operating procedures and job specifications.

## **V. Findings and Recommendations**

**Finding 1** – The exterior security of the Coroner's facility is inadequate.

**Recommendation 1** – The Sheriff-Coroner install a state-of-the-art alarm system so that the Sheriff's Office dispatch center is alerted of any intrusion.

**Finding 2** – Interior security of the facility is lacking. The evidence room and the property room are secured by a manual door lock.

**Recommendation 2** – The Sheriff-Coroner replace the manual door locks with a card key system, which would add additional security and accountability for access into sensitive areas.

**Finding 3** –Storage of reports is inadequate.

**Recommendation 3** – The Sheriff-Coroner replace the plastic storage system with a system sufficient to protect documents from fire and flood.

**Finding 4** – The Coroner Procedural Manual was last updated March, 2004. The eight-year-old manual does not contain current operating procedures and job specifications.

**Recommendation 4** – The Sheriff-Coroner review and update the manual annually.

**Finding 5:** Coroner's Office staff does not appear to have the correct information concerning obtaining funds on a timely basis for professional consultants.

**Recommendation 5:** The Sheriff-Coroner instruct staff on correct procedures for funding consultant services and include clear and precise instructions on funding additional professional consultant services in the Coroner's Procedural Manual.

#### **COMMENTS**

At the time of this inquiry, two law enforcement agencies in Solano County commented on the performance of the Forensic Pathologist. One agency commended the Forensic Pathologist for recently responding to a death scene, assisting their homicide detectives in their investigation. The other agency expressed concern regarding a testing process during an autopsy. The autopsy issue has been addressed and resolved, according to the Coroner's Office.

At the time of review, staff was formulating a plan to become an accredited forensic facility. Forensics laboratories are accredited by the National Association of Medical Examiners.

The merger of the Sheriff's Office with the Coroner's Office has led to a more cohesive, professional unit. With the integration of both offices, all resources can be shared. The hiring of a Forensic Pathologist and the termination of the contract with the Forensic Medical Group has enhanced the reputation of the Coroner's Office.

#### **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner  
Solano County Board of Supervisors

**COURTESY COPIES**

Solano County District Attorney  
Area Commander, Golden Gate Division, California Highway Patrol  
Chief of Police, Benicia Police Department  
Chief of Police, Dixon Police Department  
Chief of Police, Fairfield Police Department  
Chief of Police, Rio Vista Police Department  
Chief of Police, City of Suisun City Police Department  
Chief of Police, Vacaville Police Department  
Chief of Police, Vallejo Police Department  
Chief Deputy Coroner  
Solano County Forensic Pathologist