



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2019-2020

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office

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I. SUMMARY

The California Penal Code section 925(a) permits the Grand Jury to inquire into the performance and needs of county offices. The 2019-2020 Solano County Civil Grand Jury conducted an investigation into the conditions, responsibilities and functions of the Sheriff-Coroner's Office.

The Sheriff-Coroner's Office determines the manner and cause of reportable deaths in the county and therefore provides valuable information to families, public health authorities and legal officials. The Grand Jury toured the Sheriff-Coroner's Office and found the office to be organized and operating efficiently with available resources. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office has made improvements in the areas of facility security and records storage since the 2011-2012 Grand Jury's Sheriff-Coroner's Office Report. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office has two part-time physicians available to perform autopsies and to determine cause of death. In the past, the County had a full time forensic pathologist. Staff indicated that the level of confidence in the rigorous operations and of the records within the Sheriff-Coroner's Office would improve with additional qualified personnel.

II. INTRODUCTION

The Sheriff-Coroner's Office is located at 520 Clay Street, Fairfield. It serves the entire County while working with the law enforcement agencies in each of its seven cities. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office is mandated by California Government Code section 27491 to investigate and determine the manner and cause of all sudden, violent, unusual, and unattended deaths in the County.

The Sheriff-Coroner completes medicolegal (involves both medical and legal aspects) investigations into all deaths in the County related to homicide, suicide, employment-related, accident or infectious diseases. An investigation is also conducted when an individual has not been medically treated within twenty days of death. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office has the responsibility of notifying legal next-of-kin.

In California, the Medicolegal Death Investigation System is county-based. Counties may employ a coroner or a medical examiner determined by ordinances of a County Board of Supervisors. The Board has the authority to consolidate the duties of certain County offices, including the positions of sheriff and coroner. All fifty-eight counties in California have a sheriff. Forty-one of the counties provide for the sheriff to assume the responsibilities of the coroner. The Sheriff-Coroner has the duty and responsibility to provide thorough and accurate information on reportable deaths in the county. In Solano County, the sheriff is also the coroner. The consolidation of sheriff and coroner took place in 1999 and is an elected position.

III. METHODOLOGY

Toured:

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office

Interviewed:

Sheriff-Coroner's Office Staff

Reviewed:

Correspondence regarding the Solano

County Sheriff-Coroners' Office

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office Budget

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner Procedural Manual

Solano County Website

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office

California Government Code section 27491

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Public Health Professionals Gateway

California Coroner/Medical Examiner Laws

2011-2012 Solano County Grand Jury Report

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

The Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office services are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The office is staffed from 7:00 AM to 9:00 PM. During the hours of 9:00 PM to 7:00 AM coroner duties are performed by an on-call investigator. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office is managed by the Sheriff Lieutenant who serves as the Chief Deputy Coroner and oversees the day-to-day operation of the unit and routinely reports to the Field Operations Captain.

The Grand Jury was informed the Sheriff-Coroner's Procedural Manual is being revised to contain updated operating procedures and job specifications.

The Sheriff-Coroner's Office uses three methods to determine the manner and cause of death:

1. Medical (such as records, toxicology analysis, external forensic pathology examinations, autopsies)
2. Administrative (such as records, property, death notifications)
3. Investigative (such as on-scene conditions, examination of evidence, interviews, medical records)

The Grand Jury found the Sheriff-Coroner's Office to be clean and well-organized. The Sheriff-Coroner Investigators have separate cubicles within one room which is shared with the administrative assistant, the forensic technicians and volunteers. The autopsy room has sufficient space to conduct autopsies and for personnel to assist or observe. The morgue is well-equipped. The Sheriff-Coroner's Office also has a mass casualty plan and has received a grant to provide the County with a mass fatality trailer and a morgue trailer.

Each area was locked and required a card/key to access and each was closed and locked when the Grand Jury left the area. The Grand Jury learned that improvements to the exterior and interior security have been partially completed. Cameras have been installed at the areas of

public access and card readers are required to access most areas. Another security door has been installed at the morgue. The Grand Jury did not tour the locked property room as the staff member conducting the tour did not have a card/key to access the room.

The Sheriff-Coroner's Staff typically consists of:

- 1 Sheriff-Coroner
- Undersheriff
- 1 Captain
- 1 Lieutenant (Chief Deputy Coroner)
- 1 Sergeant (Coroner Investigation Supervisor)
- 4 Deputy Sheriff-Coroners (Coroner Investigators)
- 40 Deputy Sheriffs trained as Deputy Coroners
- 2 Part-time contracted Forensic Pathologists (Board Certified Physicians)
- 1 Forensic Technician
- 1 Administrative Assistant
- Coroner Forensic Tech Volunteers

The Deputy Coroner Investigators receive and investigate new reports. They respond to the reported scene in which the manner of death is being investigated and are usually responsible for the removal of a body. They may respond where the manner of death is unclear. The Coroner Investigators and deputy coroners work closely with other law enforcement personnel in order to determine a manner or cause of death.

Police officers or sheriff deputies are often the first on scene and are the point of contact for information. They may provide the coroner photographs and details to aid in the determination of the manner or cause of death. Law enforcement personnel may observe examinations, autopsies and sample collections. The Coroner Investigators evaluate collected information to determine if it falls within the criteria of California Code, Government Section 27491 for deaths reportable to the coroner. Reports are entered into the digital Record Management System. The information, including the examining physician signature, is scanned and documented in the Sheriff-Coroner's records.

The Forensic Technician assists in:

- performing routine follow-ups,
- collecting medical records, medical samples and x-rays,
- maintaining the autopsy room and records of human remains in the temporary custody of the County morgue,
- assisting with autopsies.

Laboratory samples are sent to a contracted laboratory outside the County for analysis.

Forensic Pathologists perform autopsies and are responsible for determining and recording cause of death. The County does not currently employ a full-time Forensic Pathologist. Two physicians are contracted and paid on a Fee-for-Service basis to work part-time as needed at any time of the

day or night. The Sheriff-Coroner determines whether an autopsy will be performed as required by California guidelines.

Each state has specific characteristics of death requiring investigation and autopsy. California Government Code section 27491 indicates the following types of deaths must be investigated:

1. Homicide
2. Suicide
3. Accidental poisoning
4. Death relating to an old or new accident or injury
5. Drowning
6. Fire
7. Hanging
8. Gunshot
9. Stabbing
10. Cutting
11. Exposure to starvation
12. Acute alcoholism
13. Drug addiction
14. Strangulation
15. Aspiration
16. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome
17. Death by criminal means
18. Death in prison or while under sentence
19. Death due to suspected contagious disease
20. Death from occupational hazard
21. Death in a mental hospital
22. Death in a state hospital
23. Death suspected caused by another person

According to California Government Code section 27491, the following types of death require an autopsy:

1. Suspected Sudden Infant Death Syndrome
2. Deaths that fall into an investigative category
3. As determined by the coroner

According to the 2019 statistics, the Sheriff-Coroner's Office handled a total of 1,200 reported deaths.

- Natural 906
- Accidental 132
- Suicide 61
- Homicide 24
- Undetermined 7
- Pending 70 (still actively investigating)

The Sheriff-Coroner's Office performed:

- Autopsies 240
- External Exams 82
- Records Review 12

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDING 1 – Solano County elected a Sheriff-Coroner and employs ninety Deputy Sheriffs. Currently, only forty are trained as Deputy Sheriff-Coroners to perform the duties of Deputy Coroner, limiting the availability of trained Deputies.

RECOMMENDATION 1 – Solano County Sheriff-Coroner's Office establish a timeline to train all deputies to perform the duties of Sheriff-Deputy Coroner.

COMMENTS

The Solano County website link to the Sheriff-Coroner's Office needs to be updated with current information.

Solano County should re-address the benefits of having a full-time forensic pathologist. A full-time pathologist may provide continuity of service and increase the level of confidence in the community, with investigators and the Sheriff-Coroner's staff.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Solano County Sheriff-Coroner

COURTESY COPIES

Clerk of the Board of Supervisors